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DECEMBER 19, 1915, TO NOVEMBER 11, 1918

BY

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ASSISTED BY

LIEUT.-COL. J. H. BORASTON, C.B.

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THE GERMAN INITIATIVE

CHAPTER I

1918: BEFORE THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE

By the end of 1917 German G.H.Q. had reached a definite decision as to what its strategy must be in the opening months of the new year. The German Army must aim at an early and supreme effort to shatter the Allied forces in France. Its policy henceforth was to be a policy of unflinching Westernism. Ludendorff leaves us in not the slightest doubt about this. Turkey may be loyal enough to the Quadruple Alliance. But she is wearing out as a fighter. The Germans must not think of spending their military resources in that quarter. The Turks may be awarded Kars and Batoum when Russia is brought to her knees: but German troops are not to be wasted in any eastern adventure. As for the Bulgars, they are not viewed by the military chiefs of Germany with confidence or enthusiasm. It will not pay to consider their susceptibilities. And, before long, we shall find Ludendorff and his colleagues putting aside protests by the Bulgars, and removing some of their forces from the Russian to the Macedonian front in order to release valuable German divisions for service in France—the grand and essential theatre of operations. Austria is more important. Yet the Austrian position in Italy has to be considered in much the same light: and preparations are made early in 1918 to bring back German divisions from that front.

Two sovereign facts at this time transcend in the judgment of German leadership all minor military and political considerations. One is that France and Great Britain must be overwhelmed in 1918 before America can establish a formidable army on French soil; the other that the

impending collapse of Russia as a great military opponent promises Germany a highly favourable—and probably a last—chance of forcing a decision on the Western Front.

A good many quotations from Ludendorff have been made in this book. They are invaluable if we are to understand the war in 1916 and 1917. But none of them is more illuminating than what he has to say about the position, the German hopes and fears and plans, at the beginning of 1918. Turkey, Bulgaria, Roumania, Austria even, are seen at this stage to be mere pawns on the chess-board of war; and pawns with which the military players of Germany have lost hope—if they ever seriously entertained it—of queening. The defeat or defection of these weak allies has to be considered and guarded against. But not for a moment must it be allowed to deflect Germany from her masterful purpose of securing a swift, absolute decision on French soil.

'All that mattered was to get together (for 1918) enough troops for an attack on the west.' The need was urgent and instant to collect, for this end, 'every man that could be spared from the various theatres' of the war.

First, it was imperative to dispose completely of Russia as a military danger. Thanks to the revolution, and the failure of the last Russian offensive in the summer of 1917, the whole situation, in Ludendorff's view, was now more favourable to Germany than 'one could ever have expected.' This collapse of Russia offered Germany a greater, a far speedier, prospect of victory in the first half of 1918 than the hope of American military development could give the Entente at that season. But to close finally with Russia was not as easy as many people without Ludendorff's knowledge and judgment imagined. Before she was free to move the great bulk of her forces from the immense Russian front to the west, Germany had to crush out a great deal of craft and ingenuity in the leaders of the revolution, if only an insignificant opposition in arms. The German military leaders had welcomed the revolution and the arrival of the Bolsheviks on the scene in the autumn of 1917 as far as this led to the collapse of the Russian Army and the blow which

that must mean to the Entente. Yet Ludendorff makes it clear that he and his colleagues suspected, dreaded, the revolutionary spirit with its pacific pretences. He had to take into account the possible effect of its propaganda on a proportion of the German troops which must still be kept on the Russian front. Besides, he distrusted Trotsky's professions of 'pacifism,' human brotherhood, and so on. Ludendorff believed—and events have shown he was right—that these professions were hypocritical.

The peace negotiations with the Bolsheviks started in December 1917. The intention of Trotsky and his colleagues to draw out the negotiations, and adroitly to use them not at all for 'pacifism' but for aggressive revolutionary propaganda, soon became obvious to the German military leaders. On both sides it was largely a game of bluff, the Germans holding the trump cards. It is curious to recall the storm of indignation which early in 1918 swept over this country and over France at the treatment of revolutionary Russia by the Germans through the denunciation of the Armistice and the stark treaty imposed at Brest-Litovsk. This storm was natural enough, for early in 1918 we had no considerable experience ourselves of the revolutionary methods and mind : such experience was only to come home to us after the war. Therefore we were stirred by a deep indignation over the treatment of Bolshevik Russia by militarist Germany. This is not the place to examine the ethics of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk as forced by Germany on Trotsky and his colleagues. No doubt some of the terms imposed on the Bolsheviks were drastic. They were too drastic, Ludendorff tells us, for the taste of some of his Austrian allies, and they shocked socialist groups in his own country. Certainly, the peace was not the 'peace of understanding' which Trotsky and his fellow delegates sought for.

So the Bolsheviks spun out the negotiations. They angled for support outside Russia. They tried to induce the enemy to evacuate the country before the terms were finally carried out. This did not suit Germany's plan for

transporting in safety the bulk of her fighting troops and material to the Western Front for an offensive in 1918 before America could develop. Austrian and German socialist pleas for the poor Bolsheviks were therefore swept aside. The armistice was denounced : hostilities were resumed on the Russian front on February 18 and 19. At once the Bolshevik leaders were brought to their knees, and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was imposed on them.[1]

Ludendorff and his supporters were right in forcing the pace. They had no time to lose. The first German offensive was to start in France less than three weeks after the Russian revolutionists were disposed of. (The date of the offensive had been settled on early in February.) The corresponding treaty with Roumania, which Ludendorff wished to accomplish quickly, was delayed for some weeks, but this was of minor importance. Von Mackensen's group of German divisions in that country was only a small one, though in the spring a proportion of the best troops were to be sent from that quarter, too, to the Western Front. No possible source of contribution from minor theatres of the war at this season was overlooked by the directors of German strategy. Thoroughly grasping the position—whilst the British War Cabinet and its advisers at Versailles were toying with the idea of a ' knock-out ' blow in the east—they made every quarter of the war feed the west. German G.H.Q. even thought of bringing the XVth Turkish Corps to the Western Front. But this Corps passed to Batoum.

[1] In April 1922 Mr. Lloyd George reminded the Bolshevik delegates at Genoa that, by signing the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, Russia had enabled the Germans to transfer their divisions to the Western Front and to place the Allies there in grave danger. The Soviet delegates might have asked why the Allies, knowing perfectly well of this danger, took no steps to avoid it by strengthening their forces on that front until after the Germans had transferred from east to west the divisions required, and delivered their blow ! The truth is the Bolsheviks were compelled to make peace with Germany on her own terms ; whereas the British War Cabinet was not compelled to jeopardise the British Army, and the whole Allied cause, by withholding from Haig, between January and March 1918, the forces essential to defend his front, and at the same time deciding through the incompetent Council of Versailles that this front should be still further extended.

'It would,' says Ludendorff, 'have been more useful in the west.' However, he had little to complain of as regards the response to his demand for every available division in view of the coming struggle on the vital front ; it was hearty and prompt. A certain force had still to be kept in the eastern theatre to watch the Bolsheviks, but even this force presently surrendered younger and more serviceable classes as drafts to the German Army in France.

Ludendorff, dealing with strategy and tactics, with the military position only, is usually to the point. He is often frank. He refrains from cheap abuse of leadership on the other side. So valuable and informing are some of his accounts of military operations, German and Allied, in 1918, as well as 1916 and 1917, that we often find ourselves disappointed by their brevity ; for latterly they do become tantalisingly brief, the truth being not so much perverted as economised.

On the other hand, Ludendorff is not so impressive in passages where he takes the field against the civil element in his own country.[1] He obviously has all the experience, some of it bitter, which entitles him to review and at times condemn the action, or inaction, of German Chancellors and other ministers who crossed him at G.H.Q. Unfortunately Ludendorff's knowledge of the civil power in the Entente countries is defective—naïvely so. He often writes as if in his own country there existed in ministers and governments no war-worthy resolution, no will to victory ; whilst in ministers belonging to Entente countries nothing is wanting from a soldier's point of view ! One might take it from some of his regrets that German Governments were innocent of the art of propaganda at home and abroad, whereas Entente Governments[2] were past masters in it—a singular illusion in so able a man, but easily intelligible when one

[1] Not only in *My War Memories*, but in his book published last year in Germany, *Kriegfuhrung und Politik*, Ludendorff lays all the blame for his defeat on the civilians.

[2] As a fact official propaganda as managed by the civilian power here was inefficient until Lord Northcliffe took charge and with the aid of Mr. Wickham Steed made a great success of it.

recollects the fervour with which military opinion in France, immersed in its own difficulties with the civilian element, envied the dominating influence (as it was thought to be) of the German military leaders over the policy of Germany. Many of his political references entertain rather than convince us. Doubtless he knows far more than we of vacillation in successive German Ministers during these years; but he knows so little of the British side in this relation that his censure of the former and his praise of the latter fail of their effect on the reader. He writes as though the civil power in Germany was constantly discouraging the soldiers in their heroic task and neglecting the moral of the population behind those soldiers: the civil power in Great Britain always encouraging its soldiers, and, by firm measures and glowing speeches, keeping public moral always elate. But—to put it very mildly—that was not so.

Ludendorff and his collaborators had immense difficulties with weakening allies like Austria-Hungary; and, wanting the command of the sea for food supplies, etc., their task ultimately grew superhuman. But the German military leaders were, throughout, largely dominant in their own realm. Moreover, where statesmanship and so-called 'militarism' or 'Prussianism' clashed in political questions, the latter was not always worsted. Far from it. The Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, for instance, as Count Czernin remarks, was a victory for 'militarism,' and Ludendorff himself shows us that. So that here, at a supremely important time, German military opinion and the demands of G.H.Q. were allowed to prevail.

Ludendorff contrasts the deportment of the German Government at the close of his two great offensives against the British Army with the deportment of the British Government at the same period. Shining contrast! What, according to Ludendorff, did the British Government do? They shrank from nothing, he gives us to understand, except applying conscription to Ireland. They raised the military service age. They called up thousands of miners and

munition workers into the army. They despatched all available shipping to fetch across the Atlantic American troops. True, they did take these steps after the tremendous onslaught of Germany on the British Army in France. But it is not captious criticism to remark that, unless they had bestirred themselves after the enemy's blow had fallen, Ludendorff would have had no cause indeed to lament his fortune in 1918. As to the exchange effected in Macedonia after an offensive which, according to Ludendorff, had cost the British some 90,000 prisoners in a few days, might it not have been more serviceable if it had been effected earlier—when Ludendorff was left free by the German Government to effect his corresponding exchange in the same theatre ?

As to our conduct in devoting our shipping to the transport of American troops, fear of ridicule forbids us to claim that as an heroic measure. It is, to say the least, probable that, had Germany possessed the shipping resources, her Government, too, in a like predicament, would have devoted it to the transport of an army raised to fight for her.

At this period—after the German offensives on the Somme and Lys—Ludendorff complains that he suffered through lack of drafts from home. He seems to have pressed the German Government in vain to call up the exempted men, and to deal sternly with shirkers from military service. This is interesting as showing Quadruple Alliance and Entente nations faced by the same problem in 1918. However, says Ludendorff, ' General Headquarters now fell back on its own reserves of men and prepared its own drafts from the troops of the Eastern Army and Roumania.' And British G.H.Q.'s comment on that might be that German G.H.Q. was lucky to have its own reserves to fall back on after its recent great expenditure in March and April 1918.

Finally, Ludendorff complains, doubtless with reason, of ' agitation ' at home. Yet that ill was not peculiar to his nation during the war. Nivelle and, after Nivelle, Pétain had complained of it in 1917. Were there no agitations in Italy, in Great Britain ? and were not the

Governments of all three of these nations reproached for not dealing drastically with the agitators ? Germany had her strikes in 1917 and 1918. But we had ours in both these years as well as in 1915 and 1916.[1]

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Owing, then, to the collapse of Russia, and the necessity of crushing Great Britain and France before America could effectively intervene, Germany's policy for 1918 was clearly and quickly determined : to strike speedily and with utmost force in the theatre that mattered—the front in France. French and British military opinion coincided that the Entente, owing to the entire loss of Russia as an ally, must in 1918 economise its forces as much as possible, stand strictly on the defensive, and wait till America could develop. Some people have insisted that the Allies went wrong in tamely allowing Germany to recover from 1917 and in waiting for her return blow—that they should have spoilt the German chance by themselves striking hard early in 1918. The defect of that criticism is in its want of information as to the ability of the Allied forces in France to undertake a great offensive at an early date. The French Army after its misfortunes in the summer of 1917 had, it is true, been most carefully attended to and husbanded by Pétain. But that it was prepared for a stroke such as Joffre in December 1916 planned for the French, or such as Nivelle strove to deliver four months later, need not be denied, for, as far as we know, that was never seriously suggested by any French leader of weight.

What was the position of the British Army at the beginning of 1918 ? Had the moral of our fighting forces in France been gravely affected by the war during the last

[1] Ludendorff, however, had in early 1918 British supporters of his view that our civilian power was nothing if not war-worthy. A famous member of the British administration told the writer in January 1918 that he had reached the conclusion that the greatest strategist we possessed was not a soldier but a civilian—namely, the Prime Minister. At this time the proposal to 'knock out' Austria by an advance across the Alps had been shelved, and was to be succeeded, shortly, by the alternative proposal to 'knock out' Turkey.

eight or nine months ? The reply is it had not—March and April 1918 prove that. The presumption of M. de Pierrefeu, referred to in an earlier chapter, that the spirit of the British troops had been dulled by the vast struggle in Flanders is wrong. Considering various Allied experiences in the second half of 1917 it is easy to understand M. de Pierrefeu's idea ; also how General Pershing should regard the fresh American troops as alone fit for the tasks they were called on to perform in July and in September 1918. But the fact remains that, at the start of the last year of the war, our forces in France were, as far as moral goes, ready, if needs be, for fresh fighting. They had the moral for the defensive : that was soon to be put to fierce proof on Somme and Lys : and there is not a particle of evidence worth considering that this moral was unequal to the offensive. Certainly the nervous strain put on troops in the hours preceding zero is intense : that 'takes it out' of even the pick of natural fighting men in the pink of condition. Even in the relaxation of shooting driven partridges we know the strain through expectancy when the whistle sounds and the game has been put up and may immediately be appearing over the top of the hedge. It is quite considerable ; still, that is safe enough—except to the sporting reputation of the shooter. But in the case of the whistle in war, the question of safety concerns in an infinitely greater matter the reputation of him who waits and expects ; and it concerns his life, as the figure of 50 per cent. casualties in many an attack illustrates. Yet to the best troops the defensive is more distasteful than the offensive. Ludendorff stretches a point when he writes that his army at this season had thrown off the depressing effect of its fighting in 1917 'in the knowledge that it was passing from the defence to the attack,' and that its moral 'appeared completely restored.' But the best of the German troops may well have welcomed the prospect of themselves at last taking the initiative. Their counter-offensive at Cambrai had shown what courage and fire they could put into this side of fighting, and the experience promised much to their leaders.

General Pershing misjudged the condition of the British troops in 1918. We were fit to take up the offensive anew in 1918 as far as the moral of our troops was concerned.

The British had, it is true, to shoulder the burden throughout the major part of 1917, as the French had been forced to do in 1914 and again in 1915. Our losses, as a result, had been severe. From January to December 5, 1917, 67 British divisions (62 infantry and 5 cavalry) were fighting on the Western Front, as Colonel Boraston has pointed out in his account of the Flanders offensive. Every one of these had been engaged in the offensive ; for virtually the whole of our front was a fighting front. The total number of divisional attacks during this period was 246, and the average number of attacks per infantry division worked out at 3·83. Two British infantry divisions were in 8 separate attacks ; 1 was in 7 attacks ; 9 were in 6 attacks ; 10 in 5 attacks ; 12 in 4 attacks ; 14 in 3 attacks ; 7 infantry and 3 cavalry divisions in 2 attacks ; and 7 infantry and 2 cavalry divisions in 1 attack.

These figures, so glorious and so terrible, should serve to fortify any man who is in doubt about the future of this nation. Nothing even in our victorious advance from August to November 1918 illustrates better the will of our masses to fight and to win through in a great cause. The writer cannot resist recording a personal experience during a walk through Havrincourt Wood in the early morning of November 20, 1917. Following from a dressing-station on the southern edge of the wood the tape which led to and from the battlefield, he met a long and straggling line of wounded men walking back from action. They were troops from one or two divisions which had already been engaged in four or more separate attacks during the year, and they were now coming back disabled from the Cambrai battle. Not all these men were lightly wounded. Many, covered with mud and blood, moved slowly and in pain. But the vivid impression they left on him was that of Great Heart. He spoke to several of these walking wounded, and heard no

complaint or lament, nothing save satisfaction over the complete surprise and success of the break-through. The cynic whose attitude when nobility or self-sacrifice in war is mentioned is one of *omnia suspendens naso* can always collect evidence, some of it no doubt superficially true, which points to depression and savage disgust in the soldier whether he is winning or losing his battles. Yet these men limping back to the dressing-station were the average British troops, and many of them had been in action on and off since April 1917.

The moral of our fighting men at the close of 1917 indeed was great. We heard much about 'shock troops' in the latter part of the war, especially of their allotment to stiff offensives by the German leaders; for example, of the 'Alpine Corps' which attempted to storm Kemmel Hill on April 18, 1918—and actually did storm it on April 25 when the French had taken over this front from us. But, examining the figures above concerning the 246 attacks delivered in 1917, we may wonder whether, after all, the bulk of British divisions should not be classed as 'storm troops.' True, after the German offensives of March and April 1918 it was necessary to reconstitute shattered divisions with the idea of employing them in a quiet sector for a time. M. Recouly in *La Bataille de Foch* remarks that this plan—the alternative was to disband nine divisions—did not altogether satisfy the French leader though it was accepted as a compromise. Yet this distinction between divisions had existed in the French Army for a long time past. It existed, too, among the Italians and the Germans, indeed everywhere except in the British Army. The only distinction with us in the latter part of 1918 lay not between divisions that could fight and divisions that could not fight; but between those that could march and fight and those that were only fit to hold the line and fight where they stood —though, when it came to the pinch, these last did march and fight.

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It was in the matter of numerical strength on the Western

Front that the British were disqualified for an offensive at this time through the length of active fighting line they were now forced to hold. The German military leaders had settled by November 1917 to attack in France. Early in December our G.H.Q. reckoned that, owing to the collapse of Russia, the enemy would be able to transfer at a minimum 30 divisions from the eastern to the Western Front within the next few months. The calculation was not exaggerated, for actually between November 1, 1917, and the fourth week in March 1918 the German infantry divisions in France increased from 146 to 192. Through that transfer of troops all the world could tell, as Ludendorff remarks, that the Germans were preparing for a mighty stroke in France. A German offensive was certain.

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It is to the credit of the British Press that the public here were warned of the coming offensive; there were many references to it in London and provincial newspapers through the winter of 1917-1918; and they came from authoritative sources at our front.

What view did the War Cabinet take as to the probability of a German offensive? Either they did not take the German threat seriously, or the members of that Cabinet differed from one another. This is incontestable, as a reference to *Hansard* proves. On March 7 Mr. Bonar Law, leader of the House of Commons and a member of the War Cabinet, made this statement :—

'This offensive ought to be coming. The Germans have advertised it. They have advertised it to such an extent that if it is not carried out it will be rather difficult to justify the inaction to their people. They have also sent their troops to carry it out. *But I myself am still a little sceptical about it.*' (The italics are the writer's.) Mr. Bonar Law went on to point out that, if the Germans attempted and failed, then nothing they had done in the war would be more decisive against them. Therein he was right; and perhaps he had in mind the prediction of the British Commander-in-Chief at the end of January that a failure

by the Germans would place them in a precarious position in August 1918.

That prediction, however, as we shall presently find, had been accompanied by the warning that we must not count absolutely on the Germans not making a great throw in the spring ; and, in any case, we must look for heavy attacks, and expect very large casualties in our army as a result thereof.

Mr. Bonar Law, in the same statement, admitted that, within the last two or three months, the Germans had transferred about thirty divisions from the east to the Western Front. He also said that our G.H.Q. was expecting the attack in a short time—though he added that various local commanders took a most roseate view of the prospects.

On March 7, 1918, then, one member at any rate of the British War Cabinet remained sceptical as to the likelihood of the Germans launching a big attack.

Another member of the War Cabinet addressed the House of Commons after the Somme offensive had failed to achieve a decision. On April 9, 1918, Mr. Lloyd George, without saying whether he, like Bonar Law on March 7, had been a sceptic in this matter, claimed that the military staff at Versailles at the end of January and February had foretold the great offensive with extraordinary accuracy. He announced that Versailles predicted the attack would come south of Arras, and would be made by some 95 German divisions. The fact that Mr. Lloyd George was here totally wrong in regard to the Versailles prediction need not at this point be considered : it is only necessary to draw attention to the fact that he claimed that his military advisers there had given warning ; and yet, despite this warning, of which he spoke in such high terms on April 9, the War Cabinet had not thought fit to give the British Commander-in-Chief the troops necessary to meet and overcome the great German offensive.

Possibly members of that singular body the Versailles bureaucracy may defend the Prime Minister by saying he did believe in the prediction in question—though they cannot

very well say the same of Mr. Bonar Law in the face of *Hansard*, March 7, 1918—but that, trusting implicitly in the general reserve scheme, he judged it unnecessary to supply the British Commander-in-Chief with more troops from home to meet the forthcoming offensive. In other words, that he considered—with Versailles—that all would go well provided only the British Commander-in-Chief gave up to the international committee six or seven of his divisions: so that there was no need to send more troops from home to meet the offensive. But, if such an excuse was offered, it might be asked, Why did the Prime Minister persist in not strengthening our front in France after he had learnt, early in March, that the general reserve scheme had perished? Had he not still a fortnight or so in which to do something at any rate towards meeting the German offensive?

What view the remaining members of the British War Cabinet took as to the probability or improbability of a German offensive in the spring of 1918 is not on record. Here, at any rate, are the statements of the two leading members, one a fortnight before the event, the other after it. *Hansard* is scarcely a witness that Cabinet would choose to call on its behalf.

Colonel Henderson, in his work *The Science of War*, declares that in all history there are few more glaring instances of incompetent statesmanship than the proposal of the British Cabinet in 1813, at the moment when Wellington was contemplating a campaign to expel the French from Spain—and was accordingly asking for more men, etc.—to detach a large force in the vague hope of exciting a revolution in Italy. Might he not have slightly modified his censure on the 1813 Cabinet had he lived to find the 1918 Cabinet, in face of this heavy enemy threat, deciding to extend its operations in a distant and subsidiary theatre of war? For that is what did occur. At the end of January 1918, the Supreme War Council at Versailles resolved on a greater effort, with more troops, in Palestine; and the resolution was reached despite the British Commander-in-Chief's warning that concentration of our

resources was now absolutely essential in the vital theatre, where alone a decision could be reached by either side.[1]

As to the Cabinet of 1813, it may have been indiscreet in thinking of sending troops to Italy ; but Wellington was not at the time threatened by a mighty concentration of the enemy in Spain, as we in 1918 were threatened in France. Lord Liverpool and Palmerston his War Secretary strike some of us as, after all, not such inefficient war figures when we come to contrast them with their successors in office a hundred and five years later.

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When, therefore, at the close of 1917, British leadership, in accord with the French and the Allied view generally, decided on a defensive policy for the first part of the coming year, its reason was simply that our divisions were, numerically, below strength ; whilst the Germans, on the other hand, were growing and growing in power. The question of manpower on the Western Front had become most grave. On December 7, 1917, there was a conference between Haig and the five Army Commanders at Doullens to discuss the situation generally. The Commander-in-Chief decided that a new system of defence in three zones should now be adopted—Forward, Battle, and Reserve—and accordingly he gave detailed instructions.

In the Despatch dated July 20, 1918, and published as a supplement to the *London Gazette* of October 21, 1918, the second paragraph ran : ' In view of the situation described above . . . it became necessary to change the policy governing the conduct of the operations of the British Armies in France. Orders accordingly were issued early in December having for their object immediate preparation to meet a strong and sustained hostile offensive. In other words, a defensive policy was adopted and all necessary arrangements consequent thereon were put in hand with the least possible delay.' Thus the published despatch : but the despatch

[1] Ludendorff, laying stress on the favourable prospects of Germany at the start of the year, admits that Asia Minor was an exception. But, he adds, that was a matter of 'quite subsidiary importance.'

originally contained these words, which should be inserted in the gap indicated above: 'to which the retention of British troops in Italy, the lack of the men required to fill up the ranks of our divisions and the urgent demands made on us to extend the British front gave added force.'

Paragraph 4 of the same despatch as published in October 1918, and republished in the volume issued at the end of 1919, ran thus :—

'. . . The strenuous efforts made by the British forces during 1917 had left the Army at a low ebb in regard both to training and numbers. It was therefore of the first importance, in view of the expected German offensive, to fill up the ranks as rapidly as possible and provide ample facilities for training. So far as the second of these requirements was concerned, two factors materially affected the situation. Firstly, training had hitherto been primarily devoted to preparation for offensive operations. Secondly, the necessity for maintaining the front line systems of defence and the construction of new lines on ground recently captured from the enemy had precluded the development of rear line systems to any great degree.

'Under the new conditions the early construction of these latter systems, involving the employment of every available man on the work, became a matter of vital importance. In consequence it was difficult to carry out any elaborate course of training in defensive tactics. On the other hand, in the course of the strenuous fighting in 1916 and 1917, great developments had taken place in the methods of conducting a defensive battle. It was essential that the lessons learned therein should be assimilated rapidly and thoroughly by all ranks.

'. . . At the same time a change took place in the organisation of the forces. Under instructions from the Army Council, the reorganisation of divisions from a 13 battalion to a 10 battalion basis was . . . completed during the month of February. Apart from the reduction in fighting strength involved by this reorganisation, the

fighting efficiency of units was to some extent affected. An unfamiliar grouping of units was introduced, thereby necessitating new methods of tactical handling of the troops and the discarding of old methods to which subordinate commanders had been accustomed.

'The difficulties with which we were faced . . . were accentuated by the increase in the British front described in the preceding paragraph. Meanwhile, in marked contrast to our own position, the large reserves in the western theatre, which the enemy was able to create for himself by the transfer of numerous divisions from the east, enabled him to carry out extensive training with units completed to establishment.'

To-day, some four years after the despatch was first published, it is not premature to print paragraph 4 as it was originally written, and sent from G.H.Q. to the Government of the day. The four gaps in the above being filled in, it runs :—

'*The lack of adequate reinforcements and my consequent inability to keep the ranks of the fighting units within a reasonable measure of their establishments gave me cause for anxiety.* The strenuous efforts made by the British forces during 1917 had left the Army at a low ebb in regard both to training and numbers. It was therefore of the first importance, in view of the expected German offensive, to fill up the ranks as rapidly as possible and provide ample facilities for training. So far as the second of the requirements was concerned, two factors materially affected the situation. Firstly, training had hitherto been primarily devoted to preparation for offensive operations. Secondly, the necessity for maintaining the front line systems of defence and the construction of new lines on ground recently captured from the enemy had precluded the development of rear line systems to any great degree.

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course of training in defensive tactics. On the other hand, in the course of the strenuous fighting in 1916 and 1917, great developments had taken place in the methods of conducting a defensive battle. It was essential that the lessons learned therein should be assimilated rapidly and thoroughly by all ranks.

'*As regarded our requirements of men, deficiencies were not being made good, and this necessitated a change* in the organisation of the forces. Under instructions from the Army Council, the reorganisation of divisions from a 13 battalion to a 10 battalion basis was *accordingly undertaken and* completed during the month of February. Apart from the reduction in fighting strength involved by this reorganisation, the fighting efficiency of units was *lowered at a critical moment.* An unfamiliar grouping of units was introduced, thereby necessitating new methods of tactical handling of the troops and the discarding of old methods to which subordinate commanders had been accustomed.

'The difficulties with which we were faced *in connection with the reduction in numbers, the necessity for extensive training, and the construction of elaborate systems of rear-guard defences,* were accentuated by the increase in the British front described in the preceding paragraph. Meanwhile, in marked contrast to our own position, the large reserves in the western theatre, which the enemy was able to create for himself by the transfer of numerous divisions from the east, enabled him to carry out extensive training with units completed to establishment.'

The passages italicised above are those which were removed from the original despatch by the home authorities, and are here printed for the first time. The question of their suppression in 1918 and in 1919 has been touched on in Vol. I., p. 28. We need not examine it anew beyond remarking that at least one passage appears to have been edited in an objectless manner: for what conceivable objection could there be to a commander-in-chief stating, long after the event, that one of his difficulties had lain in the construction of elaborate systems of rear-guard defences?

The enemy in the fourth week of October 1918 could not profit by such an item of information as that. The enemy was then being routed in the Battle of the Selle river, and in about a fortnight's time was to lay down his arms. He was not studying the winter of 1917-1918 at all. So this particular act of censorship seems as ludicrous as that of the Whitehall official who is said to have removed from a newspaper article on the war the words by Rudyard Kipling, 'The captains and the kings depart.'

Whatever may be the nation's judgment as to the propriety of editing away portions of a commander-in-chief's despatches, the passages cited are indispensable to-day if we are thoroughly to grasp the position as regards (1) man-power, (2) training, and (3) the holding of the line in the winter and early spring of 1917-1918. These three are inseparable parts of the great, menacing problem which faced Haig at this period. They may be taken in that order. In December 1917 our infantry in France was short by 117,000 men. Early in January 1918 it was intimated by the War Cabinet at a meeting in London that we were nearing the end of our resources.

This problem of man-power should be considered coolly. It was one of the interminable controversies during the war, and by appeals to passion neither side succeeded in converting its opponents. Though a great deal of nonsense was talked about conscientious objectors—who formed a minute section of the exempted—many observers at home did feel that too many men of the right age and physique for military service were being withheld by the tribunals and State authority; being allotted to tasks which, on emergency, might easily have been done by men past the military age, and by women.[1] Certainly, the 'combing-out'

[1] That feeling was accentuated by the reflection that men wounded two or three times or more were on their recovery again sent to the front. Sir William Robertson (*From Private to Field-Marshal*, p. 301, Constable & Co.) refers to these cases. He writes: 'The difficulty of obtaining drafts in 1917 can be understood when I say that while we then had on the West Front a greater number of divisions than before, the fighting being prolonged and severe, we took into the army only about 820,000 men as against 1,200,000

process must have become in 1918-1919 more drastic had not the British Army in France succeeded between August and November by superb skill and courage in breaking the German centre; for had our troops in France failed or faltered therein the war would have lasted into the next year, and we should have been forced to draw deeper on our remaining man-power resources.

On the other hand, there were organisers at home—both in and outside the Government—who, though set on victory and loyal to the Army in France, dreaded the effect of taking too large a proportion of men of military age from the essential industries at the base. Agriculture was one of these industries. The arguments of its advocates, who in May-June 1918, when the Germans were carrying out a great and menacing offensive against the French on the Aisne, opposed further 'combing-out,' were genuine. Whether they were sound is quite another matter. We might estimate that better were we furnished with figures showing what France, for example, was able to produce in 1916, 1917 and 1918, the exact number of men of military age employed during these years in her agriculture being compared with ours. Such figures have not been stated fully and authoritatively in this country. It is fairly safe to say that the withdrawals and exemptions in agriculture, in munition making and other essential industries, were smaller in Germany and France than in Great Britain. Actually, after a month's fighting on the Somme in 1916, there were said to have been

in the previous year. This reduced number of recruits was accentuated by the fact that the proportion of wounded men who recovered sufficiently to admit of being sent back to the front became less as time went on. In the early part of the war we could rely upon some 60 per cent. of the wounded becoming available for redrafting, but by the end of 1917 we had to modify this estimate in order to make allowances for those men—an ever increasing number—who had been wounded more than once. Obviously men wounded for the third, fourth or fifth time were not likely to recover so quickly, if at all, as men wounded for the first time, and medical and other officers were reluctant to send them back to the trenches. . . . It was not pleasant to see men, perhaps fathers of families, being repeatedly sent back to the front, while there were others in the country who could be spared and were not called upon to perform any military service.'

between three and four million men of serviceable age who had not yet been called up.[1] That there were also withdrawals in Germany we know through Ludendorff's complaints against the civilian authorities. They also existed in Italy and other countries engaged in the war. But, through want of exact figures, etc., comparisons between the various Powers in this matter are unsatisfying. The French, clearly, thought we were not employing enough of our man-power in active military service. Foch, for instance, at the meeting of the Supreme War Council of Versailles, at the end of January 1918, intimated as much. Célmenceau at this time and a little earlier was insistent that, despite our long offensive through 1917 and the assistance we thereby afforded the French Army in its difficulties after the Nivelle catastrophe, we were not taking our full share of the burden on the Western Front. The British Government's attitude at first towards his demands seems to have been that we could not have been expected to shoulder a still heavier burden until the whole military policy for 1918 had been decided on. However, this was speedily disposed of, for by common consent among the Allies, it was agreed that, with the Germans now concentrating on the Western Front, we must stand strictly on the defensive for a time.

But the problem of man-power at this time for the Western Front cannot be considered solely from the standpoint, alluded to above, of how far we could safely draw upon the men of military age still engaged in civilian occupations. These men would need in any case some months of training before they could be used for fighting in France: and meanwhile the British Army there needed replenishing at once, if we were to take over more line from the French and prepare at the same time against the coming German

[1] These figures are given in *The First World War, 1914 to 1918* (Constable & Co.). Colonel à Court Repington, the author, made throughout the war great efforts to get our armies adequately reinforced in France. The nation is decidedly indebted to him in this matter and for his early exposures of Versailles, as well as to Mr. H. A. Gwynne, the Editor of the *Morning Post*, who patriotically co-operated with him.

offensive. There were two sources, foreign [1] and home, from which it might expect to be recruited : (1) from (*a*) Italy, whither we had sent five divisions in November. (Her line had now stabilised on the Piave), (*b*) Palestine, (*c*) the American forces ; (2) from the troops in Great Britain.

The first of these sources was perhaps the lesser, though its troops were the better trained. Certainly every available battalion would be of value for our front in the winter of 1917-1918, when the Germans were arranging to withdraw their forces from the subsidiary theatres in the south and south-east in order to make up the great army designed to overwhelm us in France. The Italians had been reinforced with eleven divisions by France and Great Britain. The question was, would they, now their line was secure, respond by sending a like number of their own divisions to support the Allies on the Western Front ? This was mooted at Versailles on February 1, 1918. Orlando accepted the suggestion in principle, but held it could not be decided apart from the proposal for a general reserve then being considered. He pointed out that the Isonzo fighting had exhausted the Italian forces. According to Sonnino, the Austrians on that front still had an advantage in reserves.

So the prospect of drawing on Italy, or of the release of our divisions from her front, was not roseate.

Moreover, Italian opinion favoured the idea of an offensive on the south-eastern front against Turkey. Orlando thought this could be carried out without endangering the Western Front. Exactly how was not made clear : presumably, he believed we were ' over-insured ' in France—the view held and stated at the time by the British Prime Minister.

This proposal for a south-eastern offensive was actually adopted on January 30, 1918, by the Council at Versailles,[2]

[1] At the end of 1917 we had, according to Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice, not less than 1,200,000 men on other fronts than the Western Front (*Westminster Gazette*, June 3, 1922).

[2] In January 1917 there had been a similar Allied proposal to ' knock out ' Austria by an offensive on the Italian front, and British troops from the west were to be contributed if required. An intermediate proposal was suggested in October 1917—to ' knock out ' the Turks by an offensive

though the French and the British Commanders-in-Chief dwelt on the great danger in France, owing to the shrinkage in the strength of the Allied divisions there. Pétain had been forced to reduce his army by five divisions. He foresaw that he would be driven, even if not involved in a heavy offensive, to suppress twenty French divisions, through normal casualties, by October 1918—*i.e.* the French Army would then drop to seventy-five divisions.

As regards the British Army in France, if its recruitment continued at its then low rate—January 1918—and we had to defend ourselves against heavy German attacks within the next few months, the number of our divisions might drop by October to about thirty-five.

The prospect alarmed Clémenceau, and brought him promptly to the rescue. He was thinking more of Picardy than of Palestine.

In the past the French had favoured an adventurous policy in the south-east. They had taken Salonica especially under their wing in 1915-1916. M. Briand was an ardent advocate of Salonica and found a sympathiser in Mr. Lloyd George. But Clémenceau now made it perfectly clear that he would not lend himself to the new proposal to 'knock-out' Turkey —at a time when the Germans were preparing to 'knock-out' France. He was oppressed by the nearness of the peril to Paris. He called for an abandonment of the proposal. We may differ from Clémenceau's view as to what the British Army ought to undertake early in 1918. But we must acknowledge there was bed-rock common sense—as well as true vision—in his view as to a south-eastern

near Alexandretta by transferring British divisions from the west. Sir William Robertson (*From Private to Field-Marshal*, pp. 314-315, Constable & Co.) found it 'an absurd errand.' It was considered by War Office and Admiralty chiefs—one Sunday morning—and put aside. This seems to have been the scheme by which troops were to be taken from Haig at the conclusion of the autumn fighting, and, after a campaign against the Turks, were to be returned for hostilities in France in the following spring. It was abandoned when shown that by the time these travellers had disembarked at Alexandretta, it would be time for them to re-embark again to be back in France in time for active hostilities there. What a theme this would have been for the author of *Alice in Wonderland*.

stroke at this time. He simply would have none of it : and eventually it was agreed that no divisions should be withdrawn from the Western Front for that purpose. But, though the proposal for an Allied offensive against Turkey was thus condemned by the most powerful man in France, it did not follow that the British Army in France would be, even slightly, reinforced by divisions recalled from the south-eastern theatre. No help indeed came from that quarter till long after the German blow fell in March.

Finally (*c*) the American troops who were being trained in Great Britain and France early in 1918. Could they, presently, be embodied in British as well as French divisions ? The point was raised, but the American authorities would not consent to an amalgamation of their units either with British or French. They would agree, at this time, to a temporary amalgamation for training purposes alone. Their training completed, these units would have to be assembled in pure American divisions ; of which it was expected there would be eighteen available for fighting by September 1918.

So much for Haig's prospects of being able to fill up his divisions from our forces in Italy and the Near East, or from the American troops in France. They were *nil*. If his forces were in the near future to be made adequate to the 125 miles of active line he was to be responsible for, and at the same time to render him moderately secure from a sudden German offensive on a great scale, he must be supplied with recruits from Great Britain. There were enough troops at home to make his position secure from Flanders to Barisis. We know that from the large number of troops which the scared authorities poured into France after the expected German blow fell. These troops of course arrived far too late to save us from the disaster.

Who was responsible for this—the British Commander-in-Chief for not making it plain that his army was imperilled by the shortage of men for his 125 miles of front ? or the Government at home for not accepting the Commander-in-Chief's warning and acting on it ?

The action of Ludendorff in shifting division after division

from Russia to the Western Front from November 1917 onwards has been recorded. That in itself was a warning that we should be shortly engaged in heavy fighting, and must have on the spot ample resources for successful defence. Still, a government would reasonably expect some clear intimation from its own G.H.Q. The warning conveyed by the movement of the troops of the enemy might be regarded as vague. Such movements *might* be 'a blind' on his part: he *might* actually be meditating a decisive blow, say, against Italy. Therefore the Government had a right to learn definitely its Commander-in-Chief's views on the subject before deciding what to do with the troops still at home. The position in Ireland no doubt had to be borne in mind. There was the question too of a German invasion, conceivable, however unlikely. As to the latter, the arrangement early in 1918 was to keep enough troops on the spot to deal with a German landing of 30,000.

Ireland and 'an invasion' being duly allowed for, there remained a large surplus of men training or trained: and the point would be, how large a proportion of these ought to be despatched to France to secure our front there?

The Commander-in-Chief, rightly, was interrogated by the civil power. It is absolutely essential here to record the substance of his reply. The public, otherwise, cannot fairly judge who was responsible for the disaster in March 1918.

Did he early in January 1918 consider the Germans likely to risk very heavy losses by a great stroke against the Allies in France in order to secure a decision?

The answer to this is he took the view that such a stroke, aimed at the Channel ports or at Calais, would, if it failed, place the Germans in a most precarious position in view of the increase of the Allied Armies *by August 1918*, and of the diminution by then of Germany's man-power. One way of winning a war is by destroying the moral of the enemy nation through attacks of a limited scope; and this might be the German plan, being less costly and precarious than the other. But we must not take it for granted that the Germans would not adopt the more ambitious and dangerous

strategy. The next few months would be the most crucial period, the Germans very possibly making a gambler's throw for a decision on the Western Front. Therefore we must expect to be attacked heavily, to be pressed back, losing ground and guns. We ought to prepare against casualties in the British Army amounting to a hundred thousand a month.

If, however, we were supplied with the necessary divisional strength, the Commander-in-Chief was confident the Army would hold its own.

Such was his view early in January 1918. *The Government were in possession of it.* Within the next ten weeks the prospect of the Germans preferring the gambler's throw —which did, ultimately, land them in August in the plight Haig had suggested—grew much clearer. In March it became virtually certain. As we shall find later, the Intelligence Department of G.H.Q. was positive and accurate. Ludendorff went astray in this particular matter. He writes that we were surprised by the attack on March 21. He seems to have believed this because we were compelled up to the last to leave a large portion of our front south and north of the Somme insufficiently defended. This weak spot has been one of the reasons which induced him to choose the centre for his attack : though he tells us he could not be sure we should not presently strengthen our line there. We certainly should have done so, if reinforcements of troops had been sent from home in time.

Between the beginning of January and the end of the third week in March, the fresh forces required to secure the British line did not arrive in France.

The Commander-in-Chief's warning to the War Cabinet was not acted upon.[1]

[1] In regard to Haig's shortage of men for defending his front in March 1918, any reader who still has doubts about this should look at the Appendix to *Intrigues of the War* (reprinted from the *Westminster Gazette* in August 1922). Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice, a soldier whose word is absolutely trusted among all intelligent and honest people who have studied this question, therein entirely disposes of the excuses offered on behalf of the civil power.

CHAPTER II

1918: BEFORE THE GERMAN OFFENSIVE

(Continued)

THROUGHOUT the despatches are references to the need of training our troops in France. Military training is severely technical; and the civilian chiefly interested in the drama of war and its controversies may be excused for his desire, commonly, to skim the subject. He may think sometimes that the emphasis laid on it is far-fetched or pedantic. Nevertheless these references to training, and to the constant difficulties experienced in trying to accomplish it, are all-important.[1] Foch, in his admirable Introduction to the *Despatches,* briefly alludes to it. He observes that the information the despatches give as to the changes in the training and formation of the troops in the course of the war is one of the things which make them 'historical documents of the highest order.' In regard to the 'unswerving purpose which fashioned the British Army from 1917 onwards into a magnificent instrument of war,' he says 'its effect can be seen in the training of the troops . . .': and that, coming from a great professional soldier, is high praise for a trainer of armies.

Volumes could and no doubt will be written on the changes in training brought about in these years through new tactics and arms. A few of these changes have been referred to in the chapters on the offensives of 1916 and 1917. But we

[1] The writer wishes to express his thanks for reminders as to the immense importance of this training question to Brigadier-General F. G. Stone, who was responsible for the training of the 18th Divisional Artillery from September 1914 to the end of August 1915, and whose work during the war was of a sterling character.

cannot get a fair notion of G.H.Q.'s difficulties at the beginning of the last year of war unless we consider one essential change which now had to be made. For a year and a half past the British forces on the Western Front had been the aggressors. They had attacked from July 1, 1916, to November 30, 1917, when at length the enemy organised a big counter-offensive at Cambrai. One of the causes of the German success in the southern area of that battle was that we had been unable fully to train our forces in defence. The training had to be mostly in the offensive ; and that is as true of 1917 as of 1916. There had been adequate training to meet the ordinary German counter-attack ; but, till Ludendorff was able, through the collapse of Russia, to bring fresh forces west, a German offensive was not attempted. At the close of 1917 the whole position altered : the rôle of the two belligerents was reversed. This meant not only that great numbers of our troops had to be trained in defence, but also that a vast amount of work had to be done by troops as well as pioneer battalions in preparing our front against the coming German offensive. A great deal of this front, it is true, was on the whole in a sound condition for defence, though the new plan for arranging the defence in depth in three zones had to be carried out. But we were to take over twenty-five miles of front in the Somme area early in 1918, and this entailed a great labour, only part of which could be carried out before the Germans struck. For example, one feature of defence in this new area was to be a bridgehead covering Péronne and the crossings of the Somme southwards to Ham. But we had neither the time nor resources in labour to complete it by March 21.

To revert to training. To expect troops without full up-to-date training to prevail in modern fighting, offensive or defensive, would be as intelligent as to expect freshmen at Oxford to excel in the Honour History School without attending lectures. And now when, owing to the change from offence to defence, this training was of prime importance, it was decided by the Army Council that all British divisions in France—except Canadian and Australian—must

be reorganised from a 13 to a 10 battalion basis.[1] This was forced on the Army Council because deficiencies in the divisions were not being made good : by mid-December 1917 the British on the Western Front showed, as we have seen, a shortage of 117,000 men. Thus, to quote from the passage in the original Despatch of July 20, 1918, 'the fighting efficiency of units was lowered at a critical moment. An unfamiliar grouping of units was introduced thereby, necessitating new methods of tactical handling of the troops and the discarding of old methods to which subordinate commanders had been accustomed.'

The despatch put the new difficulty in a mild enough form. With twelve fighting battalions available, it had often been practicable on each divisional front, whilst perhaps two battalions were in the line, another two in support, and another four battalions in close reserve available for reliefs or to meet any sudden emergency, to keep a whole brigade sufficiently far back and sufficiently free from duties to give it real rest and training. As soon as the number of battalions dropped from 12 to 9, this arrangement fell through. Two battalions in line meant only one battalion in the brigade available for reliefs. As it was still imperative to keep the same number of battalions in line for defence, the proper provision of troops in support and for reliefs inevitably involved breaking into the third brigade. As a result, opportunities for training and rest were grievously diminished, particularly the opportunities of carrying out field exercises by the larger units. Apart from the question of fewer opportunities for training, the reduction of the number of units in the division meant, of course, that the turn for each unit to take its spell in line came round more quickly. What this means to troops can only be realised by those who have gone through the experience of waiting for their turn to come. To increase the difficulty, we were about to take over a fresh stretch of front equal to six divisions.[2]

[1] Or, excluding the 1 pioneer battalion in every division, the reduction was from 12 to 9.

[2] Sir William Robertson (*From Private to Field-Marshal*, p. 302), writing

This position had been foreseen by G.H.Q. At the meeting of the Supreme War Council at Versailles, January 30-February 2, it was pointed out that, to hold our line, we had 57 divisions, of which 47 were below establishment strength : and that through reorganisation the number of British battalions would suddenly have to be reduced in February and March by 141. And that occurred. During February our battalions on the Western Front dropped from 741 to 600 : every British infantry division on the Western Front, save those of the Dominions, thus being expected, a few weeks before hard fighting started again, to alter its arrangements for training.

THE LINE

The question of the line has been referred to in an earlier chapter. For two years past it had been a delicate one between the Allies. Joffre in 1916 had at times urged that the British should take over a greater length of front. French army commissions and other authorities had kept Joffre up to the mark, criticising him freely when they regarded him as lax or lenient. Joffre was tactful. He recognised the British point of view ; and whilst he led the French Army the difference of opinion between the Allies never became strained.

Nivelle, who followed, was not easy to work with in the matter. He was vague when asked to state what he could do in case the British in 1917 had after all to take on themselves the chief burden of the offensive. Nivelle, however,

of the necessity of keeping units up to establishment, remarks : 'If a battalion loses 500 men in action its fighting strength is reduced not to 500 but to between 300 and 400 men, and its whole fighting organisation thereby becomes dislocated and imperfect.' The personnel required to maintain the internal administration of a battalion cannot be reduced in strict proportion to a reduction in fighting strength. Fatigues and duties of various kinds make much the same demands upon a battalion whether it is up to establishment or not. The result is that actual trench strength may be as much under fighting strength as fighting strength is below establishment, and any reduction made in the paper strength of a battalion will certainly involve progressively greater proportionate decreases in the fighting strength and the trench strength of the battalion.

as we have seen, was resolved that the principal part in the offensive should be taken by his own forces. He did not seriously regard the alternative ; so his requests that we should take over a larger line early in 1917 were—on the supposition that the French Army would do the heaviest fighting—not so unreasonable. We tried to meet his wishes, and afterwards for a few months the discussion died down. In the autumn it started afresh.

In the fourth week of September 1917 the British, who had just completed their preparations for the third attack in the Flanders offensive, were engaged in the Menin Road battle where the Germans—whose losses according to Ludendorff were ' enormous '—replied with a series of powerful counter-attacks. The time was quite inopportune to raise again the line question. Yet it was discussed in a conference at Boulogne on September 25. The French Government pressed for an extension of our line and the relief of French divisions. The British Government assented, though it was stipulated that Pétain and Haig should determine between them how much more line the British Army should take over and when the relief should be accomplished. The British Commander-in-Chief was not at this conference. The matter should not have been raised and decided on—even ' in principle '—during his absence. How could the question of the adjustment of the line be well settled before the Allies had reached, for instance, some agreement as to the operations for the coming year ?

However, it was explained that the conference at Boulogne had not decided to extend the British front but had merely expressed its desire to do ' in principle ' and as far as possible what was desired by the French Government.

Three weeks later, we discussed a proposal to relieve the French troops on a six-divisional front. Such a relief, following on the Flanders offensive, was no light matter. It must reduce our own powers for an offensive in the spring. It must interfere with training. At this time the French did not meditate an offensive till far on in the summer of 1918. Assuming Russia held out, they hoped, it is true, to start

limited attacks in the spring, but would not be ready for a large effort till August. We, on the other hand, hoped at this period, if reinforced from home, to be able to strike again in Flanders in the coming year without the unfortunate delay which through the Nivelle disaster, etc., had postponed operations there in 1917. With the Passchendaele Ridge in our possession, we should have a great chance of clearing the Belgian coast in the early part of 1918.[1]

In any case it was out of the question in October 1917 to meet the French Commander-in-Chief's desire that we should take over at once a length of line occupied by six French divisions. We were still engaged in heavy fighting in Flanders. These operations might continue for some weeks, and by that time every one of our infantry and cavalry divisions in France would have been employed in at least one or two attacks, and some of them in many more; whereas the French had not been attacking on a large scale since the Battle of the Aisne and their troops obtained far more leave than the British. The request might have been easier to meet if our Army in France had been supplied with several fresh divisions for the purpose, but this was not done.

The French returned to the argument, pressed by their politicians in 1916, that the British Army, considering its numerical strength in France, was not fairly sharing the burden of the line with the French Army. But that argument was not sound. It left out of the reckoning the fact that the whole of our front was a hard-fighting, always dangerous, one; whereas a considerable length of the line held by the French was, by comparison, a non-fighting one. It is true that Nivelle had regarded as possible a German attack in Alsace-Lorraine even to Switzerland, and his successor also took—or seemed to take—that front seriously. An expectation of a German attack through Switzerland via Belfort oppressed French civilians. Yet no hard fighting actually occurred there after the early part of the war; and the Germans made no plans for such an attack. The truth probably is that danger of such an attack disappeared

[1] What that would mean was explained in Vol. I., pp. 340-43.

when the British Army became a great fighting force in the north.

One great objection to thinning out the British Army in France and scattering it on a wide front was this : the British, in the hard fighting yet to come, were bound to take the lion's share. French and British military leaders, French and British Governments, alike had to recognise this, though it would not have been discreet to emphasise it at the time. When we examine the French casualty lists for various periods in 1914 and 1915, and compare them with the British during the same periods, the thing is evident. For example, the French official list of wounded—Evacués sur l'Intérieur—for August and September 1914 amounted to '400,000 environ.' Their killed and wounded in September, October, and November 1915 were put at 410,000 ; and throughout that year French losses were very heavy. It was clear from these figures, and from other causes, that the British must bear the brunt of the offensive in 1918 as they were doing in 1917 : so that a policy of expending our resources on a long defensive line would have been short-sighted.

Haig was ready to shoulder the burden of attack ; but he could not do that and at the same time fall in with the requests of our Ally that we should greatly extend our line. At this time the French Government and some of its leading military advisers wished us to extend our front south of the river Oise. The discussion continued through the autumn till the close of the year. Painlevé, the French Premier at this time, asked us to take over a larger front ; whilst, in December, his successor, Clémenceau, not content with the proposal to extend the British line to Barisis, urged that we should relieve the French troops even to Berry-au-Bac, thirty miles farther south-east. He threatened resignation if we refused.

The discussion or negotiations continued into November and December 1917. We proposed to relieve the French as far as the Basse Forêt–St. Gobain railway provided additional British troops were not sent to Italy and the French

would take over the Nieuport sector; and Pétain agreed to this on November 27—during the Battle of Cambrai—though at the same time he asked for a further relief of the whole of his Third Army. Orders for the British to take over to the St. Gobain railway were accordingly issued in the last week of November, but they had to be suspended immediately afterwards owing to the German counter-offensive at Cambrai. A fortnight later, the discussion was resumed, the French Commander-in-Chief still pressing us to relieve his troops as far as Barisis.

The difficulty of British compliance even with Pétain's request at such a time is apparent to any one who has studied our offensives in 1917 and the reduction of our fighting strength by the close of the year. Nevertheless we consented to relieve two of his divisions by about the middle of May 1918, and by the end of the month to extend to Barisis. That was the utmost that in reason could be promised; and it was arranged between the military leaders at Compiègne on December 17.[1]

It might be supposed this would close once and for all the discussion. But it did not. The Ailette, Berry-au-Bac even, was still the goal of a powerful political and military section of the French. Clémenceau and Foch desired it. Pétain himself was doubtful whether it was a practical proposition; and he was right. Besides, the British and French Commanders-in-Chief were about to enter into proposals and plans for mutual support in view of the

[1] Taking as the common denominator a unit of miles of front line multiplied by rifles per yard, the relative figures of the French and British areas in December 1917 were: French, 323·5 units; British, 271·8 units. An approximation of the relative strength in bayonets of the British, French and Allied Armies holding these fronts was: (*a*) French bayonets—100 divisions at 7000 rifles = 700,000; (*b*) British bayonets—56 divisions at 9000 rifles = 504,000; (*c*) Belgian bayonets—6 divisions at 10,000 rifles = 60,000; (*d*) Portuguese bayonets—2 divisions at 10,000 rifles = 20,000. Total British, Belgian and Portuguese bayonets = 584,000. Reducing this to a common denominator, we get: French—350 units; as compared with British, Belgian and Portuguese—290 units. Thus the line of divisions between the French and British areas was as nearly as possible correct in accordance with the relative strengths of the German forces opposed to them.

German offensive on the Western Front which all sides now expected ; and this should in some degree help to settle the question of the line.

But a new authority was now to attempt to settle this apparently interminable discussion, namely, the Supreme Council of Versailles. This body had come into existence in November owing to the collapse of the Second Italian Army and the retreat to the Piave. It will be necessary to give some account presently of its proceedings. Here we need only consider its proposed solution, in December 1917 and January 1918, of the problem of the line. The French intended to raise the question at the meeting of the Council at the end of January 1918, and the British representatives had of course to be acquainted with the arguments against the extension to Berry-au-Bac which was to be pressed for. They were therefore reminded that, whilst part of the French front was in effect a non-fighting front, the whole of the British front was an active one : that the great offensives of the British in the second half of 1917 had taken the pressure off the French : that large numbers of our troops had been without leave for a year and a half.

The British representatives were given to understand that, if the extension went beyond Barisis—which was the uttermost that could be agreed to, and which would strain our man-power resources in France gravely—then the British Commander-in-Chief could not undertake the responsibility of defending the Channel ports.[1] But the representatives of the Council were not convinced of the soundness of this view. They held that the river Ailette and the Laon–Soissons road ought to be the point where the two armies should join ; and that this extension of the British front ought to be carried out as a continuous operation. In case of an enemy attack, arrangements could be made for mutual extensions by the armies of Pétain and Haig.

[1] This was equivalent to a threat of resignation—and it was so intended (see Vol. I., p. 244). What would have happened in March 1918 if we had taken over the line to Berry-au-Bac !

This lengthening of our line would mean taking over more than fourteen miles of fresh front. It would require another four divisions; and this when our army on the Western Front was being mulcted of two cavalry divisions and the infantry being reorganised. The proposal was unsound and dangerous. Who can wonder that the British Commander-in-Chief had to ask to be relieved of responsibility for any disaster which might ensue if it were insisted on ?

The result was a verbal compromise. The Supreme Council did not exactly insist. It did not exactly desist. It resolved at the end of January that in principle the proposal should stand; but conceded that the question of when the extension from Barisis to the Ailette should be carried out must be left to Pétain and Haig.

This closed the prolonged discussion on the line. At the end of January 1918 we completed the extension of our line to Barisis, and so had 125 miles of active front to hold. Seven weeks were allowed us by the enemy to do what we could, by the unceasing work of our troops who had been fighting through 1917, to reorganise the new front taken over. The time was inadequate.[1]

THE PÉTAIN AND HAIG COMPACT

Early in 1918, Pétain and Haig, recognising that the Germans were getting ready for their offensive, and that the point of junction between the French and British Armies was one of danger, discussed plans for mutual support. If the enemy attacked the French heavily at or near this point, the British should intervene, and vice versa. The discussion began in the fourth week of January, and continued into March when the plans for mutual support were agreed on in detail. It has been stated that this was a private under-

[1] The American author of *Battlefields in the Great War* (Oxford University Press) remarks that this line which we took over had been in the Allies' possession since the Hindenburg Retreat, and he blames the British especially for its insufficient fortifications. That is a typical specimen of the kind of criticism applied to British leadership over the catastrophe of March 1918.

standing between the British and French Commanders-in-Chief; and that it was concealed from Foch, the chief military representative of France at Versailles. There is no truth in that. At the various meetings between the French and British representatives of G.Q.G. and G.H.Q. and other officers in both armies, Foch's representatives were frequently present, and naturally they followed the whole discussion closely. As many as forty British and French officers attended some of these conferences.

We may first consider the question of French support in case of a heavy enemy attack on the Third and Fifth British Armies. Many of the French, it should be remarked, believed early in March, if not before, that the Germans would make a heavy attack on the French troops about Reims. Such was the view of, for instance, the G.A.N. at this period. The British believed the attack would fall on our Third and Fifth Armies; and, as we shall see later, the British Intelligence, G.H.Q., predicted the actual attack which the enemy made on March 21, and were right virtually to the day.

On January 25 Pétain proposed that French co-operation, in case of the enemy attacking, should take the form of relief of the right portion of the British front, or else of actual intervention in the battle; and that the British should relieve or intervene on the French left in case the heavy attack fell there. As regards the position should the enemy attack the Belgians in the north, Pétain suggested that the French and British should aim at holding him on the line Coxyde–Furnes–Loo. As, however, there would be only two French divisions available in the north, the British divisions must supply the greater part of the aid there.[1]

Haig agreed in the main to Pétain's proposals, and forthwith various French and British army and corps commanders were instructed to study and work out practical plans for co-operation, including the question of who should

[1] Also there were schemes for flooding Belgium, and for a series of defensive positions all radiating like a fan from about Hazebrouck. The Germans, by striking at Hazebrouck, tried to turn all these positions.

in the several sectors be in command of the Allied troops supporting each other.

The proposals were quickly proceeded with. Before the end of the month, our Fifth Army was able in an order to state that the French plan was :—

(1) Intervention in the rear zone.

(2) Counter-attack to restore this zone.

Correspondence between the military chiefs and a series of conferences followed during the next few weeks. The Third French Army and the Fifth British Army examined the ground and worked out necessary details as to procedure. The Third French Army, for instance, issued observations in regard to a covering position east of Amiens. The object was to cover a concentration on the left of the Somme above and below Péronne with a bridgehead on the river-bank. It instructed its staff to make a survey accordingly. The duties of the covering troops would be to offer active resistance to the enemy, and to be ready to extend forward to reinforce the British fighting zone. They would also be used to improve communications, etc. The concentration being completed, the battle of intervention would start.

On February 20 notes on the form of French intervention for the support of the British were supplied to our First, Third, and Fifth Armies : these dealt with a concentration —by means of rail or road, or a combination of both—of six French divisions in the Noyon–Montdidier area ; near Amiens ; and about Frévent and St. Pol.

Early in March it was decided that the French support should take the form either of a partial or entire relief of the Fifth Army, rapidly carried out (the front being lightly held and the reserve divisions being ready to move at once) ; or, in case of serious attacks on the British, by French intervention on the battle front.[1] Three areas of concentration were settled on. French troops were to operate as far

[1] There was an Hypothèse A, for intervention with a block of troops ; and an Hypothèse B, for taking over line, and setting free troops of the army attacked. The scheme did not fail through under-elaboration when the crisis came.

as possible on the British right ; they would be under British command but were to be used as a whole ; and they would probably be employed for (1) counter-attack, (2) quick occupation of the defences behind the battle front, (3) taking over the right of the British fighting front. The concentration areas finally arranged for were (1) Noyon–Montdidier;[1] (2) round Amiens ; (3) round Frévent and St. Pol.

So much for the plans for active intervention in a battle should the enemy strike heavily at the British. It was also settled that if French support took the form of relief rather than full intervention, this should be in three stages, namely : (1) relief to the Omignon river ; (2) to left of the Cavalry Corps front ; (3) the remainder of the Fifth Army's front. By March 10, practically the whole plan had been agreed on.

As to the British support of the French, supposing the blow of the enemy fell on the latter : it was proposed by our G.H.Q., in the second week of February, that in this case we should aid our Ally by (1) relieving the troops on his left ; (2) by intervention on our right, in which case the troops would be under the command of the Fifth Army; whereas, if we intervened in the battle elsewhere on the French front the troops would pass under French command. The IXth British Corps, under Lieut.-General Sir A. Hamilton Gordon, was instructed to discuss the matter with the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth French Armies (G.A.N.) and prepare the necessary plans for support in case the French were heavily attacked by the enemy. If the support took the form of relief, six British divisions would take over the French left, all of them to be in line. If it took the form of intervention on our right and under our Fifth Army, there would be eight divisions available, in each case with strong artillery support : and in either case two Corps H.Q. were to be supplied, together with the above forces. The commander

[1] On March 22 the scheme for this area was partially applied, 2 French infantry divisions and 1 dismounted French cavalry division being ordered to concentrate in the south part of the Fifth Army's ground and to help to hold the line of the Crozat Canal.

of the IXth Corps was instructed to study, in connection with these plans, such questions as the defensive scheme of the Sixth French Army, concentration, reconnaissance of approach from concentration, deployment for counter-attack, the passage of the Oise, etc. He visited the Sixth French Army and discussed, first, the best method of relief ; and here it may be remarked that, both in the British and the French plans for support, the decision as to whether that support should take the form of relief or full fighting intervention was left to the course of events. This clearly was the right arrangement. For the British or the French Commander-in-Chief to have tied himself down simply to relief or simply to intervention before he could say for certain which form of support would be better suited to the German attack would have been bad : it could not be determined in January, February or March whether the Ally would require the first or second form, as all depended on the strength of the enemy's attack and the area involved. Thus the French G.Q.G. first drew up a scheme, to be studied and discussed by both sides, for the relief of the Sixth French Army by from three to eight divisions. The Commander of the Sixth Army in the middle of February anticipated a serious attack on his own forces and on those of the Fifth British Army next to them.

A conference was arranged for February 22 at Compiègne to discuss our co-operation with the French if they were attacked : it would define the general conditions of support which would only be asked for in case we were not ourselves seriously engaged. Meanwhile the Commander of the IXth British Corps closely investigated the whole question and drew up a number of proposals relating to the order and time of relief, distribution of British relieving forces, suitable detraining stations, and artillery and other arrangements.

Those who assume there was only a confused and non-scientific understanding as to British and French co-operation have had no opportunity of examining the discussions and plans at this stage. They were thorough and system-

atic ; and the idea that the two Commanders-in-Chief would have been spared the catastrophe of March 21, 1918, had they only agreed to the Council of Versailles manipulating a body of reserves instead, springs out of ignorance. A general reserve to be employed suddenly as a bolt from the blue, always in the right position for smashing the enemy when he has attacked in strength and broken through, is attractive. But it is a notion likely to set the credulous on talking rather than thinking. What would have happened in regard to the attack on March 21, 1918, had such a bolt intervened —or for the matter of that on May 27, 1918—no one can tell for certain. But it is ignorant to represent that these plans for mutual support and unity of action were unthorough or incomplete because in the result they broke down. Also, it is a gross injustice to a number of French and British officers who studied and worked them out.

Finally, at the Compiègne Conference it was decided that, in case of British co-operation taking the form of relief, we should supply six divisions, four brigades of field artillery, and two brigades of heavy artillery : in case of intervention, with eight divisions, five or six brigades of field artillery, and two brigades of mobile heavy artillery, supporting the Sixth French Army. If relief, our troops would be under the command of the Fifth Army : if intervention, they would be at the disposal of the French G.O.C. the G.A.N. ; and if practicable they were to be used as a whole. The several areas for relief were fixed, and also those for intervention.

These plans for co-operation meant a great deal of hard thinking and preparation. But the second relating to British support was practically as agreed on and complete as the first when the storm broke on March 21.

CHAPTER III

'CAVALRY STUDIES'

A FEW observations on cavalry may not be inappropriate here. As we shall find, Haig, early in September 1918, held that the German resistance might be crushed within a very short time if he was able to carry through his operations. He saw that, when once the Germans were forced out of their defensive front facing his First, Third, and Fourth Armies, the war would enter on a new phase, and become one of movement. The lines of German defence behind the Hindenburg Line were known to be quite inferior, largely unprepared. Hence he pressed, and pressed again, for munitions of mobility.

If we were to advance swiftly after we had forced the Germans out of the Hindenburg Line, we must do all we could to prevent them, during their retreat, from destroying the railways. The Germans depended on these railways for supplying their front during the trench war: equally we should need the railways for supplying our forces when we advanced against the Germans in a war of movement. The Germans would do their utmost to destroy the railways as they retreated, and the great thing was to prevent this as far as possible. The only effective way was to push forward with mounted troops. Haig set the highest value on this arm for the purpose and asked the authorities to reinforce him in it. He wanted—and early in September asked for—mounted troops for the Australians for instance. The soundness of this view was *by then* undisputed and indisputable. But, it might be asked, was not September 1918 late to

press for supplies of mounted troops for use in the almost immediate future ?

The question would be a fair one. Did the Commander-in-Chief press for reinforcement in this arm then for the first time ? If he did, how could the home authorities be blamed if they were able to do little to help him ?

For answer to this one must look back a few months. This is a matter of capital importance. It may rise again in war. Progressive modern war has a way of returning to 'obsolete weapons'—as 1914-1918 certainly showed.

The Commander-in-Chief had often stressed the value of mounted troops for the Western Front. They did not, it is true, avail in 1916 during the fighting on the Somme. In 1917 also their scope was limited, though Nivelle rightly provided them for the exploitation of his stroke on the Aisne. At Cambrai in November 1917 they unfortunately did not carry out the real design of that battle, exploitation. But Haig's belief in the ultimate value of this arm was unshaken. It waned elsewhere—at home certainly. To attach importance to cavalry was to risk one's reputation. How could we hope to win the war if we allowed ourselves to be influenced or—worse—led by 'cavalry generalship' ? Popular novelists and their following made light of cavalry. Cavalry was for the Horse Guards Parade ; in the grim business of war it was a fossil. We might as well ask for the musket-proof taslets which Captain Dugald Dalgetty recommended to Gustavus and Wallenstein. The day for cavalry adventures was over—except in the Holy Land.

Yet here was a Commander-in-Chief still dwelling on the worth of mounted troops.

On January 7, 1918, for instance, the Commander-in-Chief told the War Cabinet that this arm would, through its mobility, be of high service in 1918 for offensive and defensive purposes. He pointed out that our cavalry was really a highly trained form of mobile infantry.

What value did the civil power attach to this view ? As far as we can discover—none. One member of the War Cabinet felt bound to warn Haig he must not look for aid in

that direction. Horses had to be fed: and to feed horses ships must be used. Another member of the War Cabinet announced that the opportunities for cavalry would probably have to be reduced during the next few months.

Now the arguments as to economy in shipping which the War Cabinet lodged against mounted troops would have been strong, we might almost say they would have been conclusive, even in January 1918, provided the War Cabinet was strictly practising this economy in the lesser theatres of war in the east. But what are the facts? The War Cabinet, whilst preaching and practising economy in shipping by the reduction of the strength of our mobile arm on the Western Front, was taking the opposite course as regards the eastern theatre—a theatre of trivial importance to the safety of the Allies at this time when Ludendorff was accumulating his strength in France, pouring in division after division from the dead Russian front.

These shipping economists told Haig on January 7, 1918, they must use their vessels for bringing in American troops rather than supplies for the mobile force the need of which he foresaw. But they could have done both, if, at this period when Ludendorff was openly preparing to smash us on the Western Front, they had rigidly economised in the shipping for their play in the entirely subsidiary theatre of the east. That they were not ready to practise in the east this economy, which they preached and practised for the Western Front—the front that supremely mattered—is illustrated by what occurred three weeks later at the meeting of the Supreme War Council at Versailles. At that meeting, as we have seen, the War Cabinet proposed—with the approval of the Italian representative Orlando—further commitments in the east, in order to 'knock-out' Turkey. Those commitments meant expenditure in shipping. The proposal was modified, not when the British Commander-in-Chief opposed, but when Clémenceau on January 31 came to the rescue,[1] and broke out against it.

[1] Clémenceau, by the way, dramatically called attention to 'the dreadful danger imminent near Paris itself.' Eight weeks later it was dread of

How, then, seeing that further expenditure in shipping was encouraged by the civil power in regard to the unessential front in January 1918, can the preaching of economy in regard to the essential front be taken quite seriously ?

Perhaps if Lord Haldane had in January 1918 been working as Secretary of State for War with Haig as he was in 1906, he would have recognised the foresight of the latter as to the need for mounted troops. At any rate he had recognised years before the value of mobility in war. It is no secret that in the view of the Commander-in-Chief Lord Haldane was the greatest of our Secretaries of State for War.

So on the Western Front, mobility, *i.e.* mounted troops, was condemned by the War Cabinet. Expenditure in shipping for the east, economy in shipping for the west, together put it out of the question.

What chance of a sympathetic hearing had the Commander-in-Chief with such a War Cabinet as this in January 1918 ? He tried, however, one more argument. He pointed out the difficulty of re-creating so highly trained and technical an arm of war, once it had been disbanded. But he spoke to the deaf. Our cavalry in France was already shrinking : and early in February 1918 two divisions of it were removed by the home authorities to the eastern theatre. True, these divisions were Indian, and conditions in France were not altogether favourable for them. They appear to have been sent to the east to replace some British infantry battalions there. But can any really valid excuse be found for removing troops from the Western Front in February 1918 ? The divisions despatched from the Western Front to Italy had already weakened us badly. The east should have contributed to the west at this perilous time. This, obviously, was not the season to draw from, or effect exchanges with, our army in France.

Anyhow the War Cabinet was not in the humour for ' Cavalry Studies.' That aspect of war may have been all right for the stiff military and professional type of mind

this particular danger which delayed the arrival of French divisions to aid the Fifth Army.

in, say, the year 1907. But it did not suit the British Government in 1918.

So the mounted troops were reduced on the Western Front early in February 1918. What the remnant of them —allowed, perhaps, as a sort of picturesque luxury—did to hold back the enemy in March 1918 is well known. Later still, we shall see what mounted men did on August 8, and afterwards when the enemy was falling back.

Had the authorities at home put a little more faith in the foresight of the man to whom they entrusted the British Army in France, they would have borne in mind his warning to them on January 7, 1918.

More power on the mobile side would have economised time in the advance to victory. It would, that is, have economised lives.

Into the question of what cavalry can be used for in wars of the future, we would rather not plunge. A school, almost a university, has sprung up which holds that the war or wars of the future will be fought and decided not on earth but in the heavens by bombs, poison or other. If that is so, cavalry will certainly be at a discount, and mobility in the air will be the only essential. But in such a case will not trained infantry and great armies, conscript and voluntary, together with tanks, etc., also be at a discount? It is noticeable, however, that the Continental nations have not, so far, conformed to the views of this latest school of war. Infantry, tanks, and conscript armies are still the fashion, though the possibilities of aerial warfare are, rightly, being studied.

CHAPTER IV

THE SUPREME WAR COUNCIL AND THE GENERAL RESERVE

The Supreme War Council of Versailles has been referred to in previous chapters. We must turn back a little and briefly recall its origin and its procedure. This means covering some familiar ground, for much has been written during the last year or two about Versailles by its supporters and its opponents. But it is well to be clear as to how the council arose and what was its province.

In August 1917 the Italians attacked and threw back the Austrians on a thirty-mile front on the Carso and Julian Alps. The country was precipitous and exceedingly difficult, but, in the course of the month, after fierce and costly fighting, the Italian Army did occupy the summit of Monte Santo and most of the Bainsizza plateau. During September and three weeks of October, now one side now another claimed successes, but the battle gradually died down. On October 24, however, the Austrians, reinforced by nine German divisions, attacked on a twenty-mile front and broke through at Tolmino and Caporetto. The Second Italian Army collapsed, and a disastrous retreat followed. By the end of the month the Germans claimed over 180,000 prisoners and 1500 guns. The British offensives in Flanders during October and November and at Cambrai prevented Ludendorff from sending considerable forces to the Austrian front. Still the position was menacing and the chance of Italy being forced out of the war was not remote. It was decided to send to her aid eleven French and British divisions.

Military and civil representatives—Foch and Robertson, with the French and British Prime Ministers, M. Painlevé

and Mr. Lloyd George—hastened to Italy, and on November 9 the three nations at a conference at Rapallo decided to set up a supreme Allied council. It was to survey the war as a whole, and through information furnished from the fronts co-ordinate the plans prepared by the general staffs. For some time past the British Government had been studying with the French the possibilities of some such co-ordination for the various fronts west and east. An inter-allied war council had been suggested in July 1917. Now at Rapallo it was resolved to establish a council composed of the Prime Minister and a member of the government of each Great Power whose armies were fighting on that front. The extension of the council to other fronts was reserved for future discussion. The general staffs and commanders of the armies of each Power charged with the conduct of military operations were to remain responsible to their respective governments. The general war plans drawn up by the military authorities were to be submitted to the new council, which would propose, if it thought fit, any desirable changes therein. Each Power was to appoint a permanent military representative to act as a technical adviser to the council; and he would receive from the government and competent military authorities of his own country the necessary information and proposals as to the conduct of the war. It was settled the council should, normally, meet at Versailles where the permanent military representatives would be established. There was to be at least one meeting a month. Foch, Sir Henry Wilson and Cadorna were chosen as the representatives of France, Great Britain and Italy. The United States chose General Bliss.

The council met very soon in France, and applied itself among other subjects to the problem of the line. This has been discussed in the last chapter, and we shall not return to it here beyond recalling that the French and British Commanders-in-Chief had agreed, before the council was established, that at the end of the 1917 operations the British should take over to Barisis. The council, like the War Office and G.H.Q., was also studying at this time the

problem of unity of control. There were three suggestions : (1) the appointment of a generalissimo ; (2) the establishment of an executive of the council, with Foch for chairman, its special duty being the formation and handling of a general reserve ; (3) exercise of control in regard to this general reserve by collaboration between the chiefs of staff or their deputies.

The first was ruled out promptly. In the House of Commons, on November 19, 1917, Mr. Lloyd George, speaking of the appointment of a generalissimo of the Allied forces, said, 'Personally, I am utterly opposed to that suggestion.'

He added that it would not work, and might produce friction between the Allied Armies and the nations.

Mr. Asquith, in the same debate, said he did not understand that unity of control was intended to lead on to 'unity of command.' If it was, he thought he should be 'able to submit to the House overwhelming arguments against it.' He agreed with the view that there was only one front : but 'one of the corollaries to that proposition is that you may often render the best service to an Ally at one end by using, for the moment, your maximum force at the other end of the line.' That was also the reasoned view of our leadership in France. The relief of Verdun by the stroke at the Somme is a classic illustration of Mr. Asquith's argument. But there were plenty of these illustrations during the war. The opposite doctrine, namely, that we must be ready constantly to detach forces from one front—and that the vital front—in order to hurry them to another likely to be attacked, broke down in practice, for we had to act on exterior lines. Moreover, it was costly in shipping and put a heavy strain on the British Navy at a time when the enemy submarines were threatening our existence. Improving the military land communications between the Western Front and the Italian, for the purpose of passing, if necessary, troops quickly between one country and another, was another matter. The council attended to this matter, and was right to do so.

The controversies that arose over the Rapallo Conference were not in regard to the principle of unity. All concurred therein. Soldiers and statesmen alike had long been trying to apply the principle. Lord Kitchener's instructions to two Commanders-in-Chief were founded on it; and in 1916 Joffre and his colleagues were even suspected of paying, if anything, too much attention to the co-ordination of the efforts of the armies of the east with those of the armies of the west.

The controversies arose not over the principle but over its method of application. The council did serviceable work in regard to Italy, etc.; [1] and the figures and facts in regard to war generally which it collected and discussed were not without their use. But its main purpose appeared to be the creation of a general reserve of French, British, Italian, and ultimately American divisions; and over this there sprang up a direct conflict of opinion which in the end wrecked the new authority.

The council assembled at Versailles on January 30 and deliberated for four days. It considered a general scheme of operations for 1918 which proposed (1) a policy of defence on the Western Front to be exchanged later perhaps for one of attack; and (2) an offensive in the east. As to the first, this had, as we have seen, already been accepted as inevitable by the French and British military leaders who had been making their preparations for defence. Both Commanders-in-Chief were in accord with the plan. Our own G.H.Q. recognised that if the recruiting at home for the Western Front did not greatly increase, we should have to reduce a number of divisions within the next eight months or thereabouts, as we must expect to be involved in heavy attacks costing us perhaps half a million casualties; and the French Commander-in-Chief foresaw his army dropping to 75 divisions. Neither Commander-in-Chief, then, questioned the necessity of a defensive policy in the west, and neither could approve the proposition for an offensive in the east.

[1] It set to work improving the facilities for conveying troops from France to Italy. These were bad and ought to have been dealt with much earlier.

Nevertheless the eastern offensive was adopted in principle by the council : it was mitigated, however, by the explicit understanding that no forces should be removed from the west to attack in the east.

On February 1 and 2 the two matters discussed were (1) the respective functions of the Commanders-in-Chief and of the new supreme authority, and their mutual relations and responsibilities ; (2) the creation of a general reserve of French, British and Italian divisions.

As to the first, Clémenceau considered it should be the business not of the council but of the commanders to form plans for war operations ; and that they could refer their plans to the council. It was agreed that the commanders' plans should be sent to the council which would ensure their co-ordination, and be itself entitled to take the initiative in any proposals to this end.

The French Commander-in-Chief in this discussion differentiated between the conduct of war as a whole and the conduct of a battle. He thought commanders-in-chief should be given by the governments general lines of action : but as to a general reserve, this came within the sphere of the battle and commanders-in-chief.

The question of a general reserve was then raised. This was far the most important and controversial matter discussed by the council. Agreement was never truly reached, though decisions were taken here as at the Calais Conference in February 1917. Foch desired a general reserve, over and above the ordinary army reserves, for use, if required, on the whole of the French and Italian fronts. The number of divisions to be contributed by each of the Allied Armies was to be decided upon by an inter-allied authority, which would be empowered to make all necessary preparations and to decide on the manner in which the reserves should be used. Such an authority might consist of the chiefs of staff, with Belgian and United States representatives.

After discussion, Foch suggested the establishment of a war board to co-ordinate all operations from the North Sea to the Adriatic ; to consist of French and British C.G.S.,

with Italian, American and Belgian representatives; and to draw up plans in consultation with the commanders-in-chief. Its duty should be to contribute the general reserve, determining the number of troops and their places of concentration. With the board would rest, exclusively, the control of the general reserve's action, but until action was taken it would remain under the direction of the various commanders-in-chief; and they would be responsible for transportation and concentration of the troops.

This did not meet with Italian approval. Italy had no C.G.S. Hence she feared her representative on the board would not have authority equal to that of the French or British. Moreover, he would have to give orders to the Italian Commander-in-Chief, and no one in Italy had power to do that.

Paris as a proposed meeting-place for the board was disapproved of by both Italians and British.

On February 2 the conference was resumed and resolutions were adopted. The Americans favoured using the existing machinery of the council for constituting the general reserve. The proposal that the chiefs of staff should be the directing authority at Versailles was therefore negatived.

Finally, it was decided that a general reserve should be created for the French, Italian and Balkan fronts; and that an executive, composed of the permanent military representatives of France, Britain, Italy and the United States, should in consultation with the commanders-in-chief :—

Decide on the strength of the general reserve and on the contribution of each nation thereto.

Choose the spots where it should be stationed.

Arrange for its transportation and concentration.

Decide when and where it should be used; and decide on the strength of its counter-offensive.

On the general reserve moving for action, it would come under the direction of the commander-in-chief to whose aid it was assigned. Before this move was decided on by the executive at Versailles, its divisions would remain, in matters

of discipline, training, etc., under the orders of the commander-in-chief from whose armies they had been contributed ; but the commander-in-chief would have no power to order any movement for action ; that would exclusively pertain to the executive committee.

Should irreconcilable differences of opinion arise as to a point of importance connected with the general reserve, any military representative would have the right to appeal to the council.

Foch by general consent was nominated President of the Executive Committee.

* * * * * * *

Such were the arrangements for the strategic or general reserve for the French, Italian and Balkan fronts and its control from Versailles. The British Commander-in-Chief was ready to do his utmost to work in unison with the new authority, as he had with Joffre throughout 1916 ; with Nivelle when the relations between the leaders were adjusted on a fair working basis ; and later with Pétain. But he remained responsible, absolutely, for the security of the British Army in France ; and now, when he had just taken over a new stretch of front quite deficient in defensive works, he was asked to deplete his forces for an experiment which neither he nor the French Commander-in-Chief could view without misgivings.

It must be borne in mind that the proposal for this general reserve was made at an unpromising time. With a great enemy attack impending, new experiments, brilliant or not in conception, are precarious. This particular one was a patchwork of military and civilian opinion, and the authorities who designed it were not agreed among themselves as to the best way of constituting it. Foch had proposed, and Robertson concurred, that the grand reserve should be directed by an executive composed of the chiefs of staff of the various armies. The Italian and the British statesmen opposed this. They preferred to entrust the weapon to the new authority, military cum civilian—or civilian cum

military—at Versailles. Which of the two plans was preferable was a question of dispute and theory. And, as the plan adopted in principle was never applied in practice, it remains to-day a question of dispute and theory—if any one still cares to discuss it. An atmosphere of doubt and hesitancy, military and civilian, followed by compromise and a hasty patchwork, was a bad one for the birth of a war experiment of the first magnitude in February 1918.

But this difference of opinion as to whether the weapon should be entrusted to the chiefs of staff or to an executive at Versailles coming more or less within the civilian sphere, though real enough, was not the most vital objection at such a time to the scheme. Far from it. The point is the Commander-in-Chief was asked to detach a considerable number of divisions—six or seven—from forces already inadequate to defend 125 miles of active fighting front against which the enemy was accustomed to mass the best of his troops ; and to hand these divisions over to a committee of the representatives of four nations who would discuss and decide on their position and use. Could he feel confidence that such a committee would act and act quickly, its French and British and Italian and American members at complete accord, on an emergency ? He could not, so he was unable to contribute to this general reserve.

As a result, the proposal perished.[1]

There appears, by the by, to have been some disappointment on the part of Foch and one or two believers in the scheme that no official reply from the British leader, as to his willingness or the reverse to contribute to the general reserve, was at once received. But as a fact the proposal,

[1] The end of the proposal for a general reserve has been sometimes lamented, by those who worshipped it as a war-winner, as almost equal to the end of Versailles. But, clearly, all the devotees to Versailles do not take that view. Thus in 1921 in *The Round Table* was printed a paper read by Sir Maurice Hankey on November 2, 1920, in the course of which he declared that ' for the remainder of the war, that is to say, during its culminating stages, the whole of the higher strategy and policy of the Allies was concerted almost exclusively at the Supreme War Council ' ! In a chart indicating the organisation of the Supreme War Council, he showed that its activities extended to the control of fats, sugar and tobacco.

oddly enough, does not seem to have been officially made to the British leader till the end of February 1918! The official proposal, suggesting a general reserve of at the lowest thirty divisions—French, British and Italian—was ready by February 6, and presumably it was despatched officially on that date to the French and Italian leaders: if so, why not to the British? That the British leader was already aware of the proposal is another matter. An official reply, however, is made to an official request; and it was duly made by the British leader when he received it in the ordinary manner. However, there is no need to labour this point. The delay complained of did no damage whatever to the Allied cause. As a fact, the Executive War Board knew well enough before the end of February that British leadership had decided it could not detach any divisions other than those already contributed for Italy from a perilously extended front.[1] The head of the Executive War Board knew; Clémenceau knew—one may assume they all knew.[2] And before March the proposal was, virtually, at an end. Fortunately, no serious attempt was made between then and the huge German offensive against the Third and Fifth Armies to revive it. Conceivably the French Commander-in-Chief was

[1] Moreover, by the end of February 1918 it was perfectly well known that the British Intelligence department and the British Commander-in-Chief expected a great German attack where eventually that attack fell. Even the British military representatives at Versailles must by then have abandoned their famous prediction and map indicating a great German attack between the La Bassée Canal and the Bapaume–Cambrai road in the summer, and have adopted instead the accepted and correct G.H.Q. view! The French leaders and Intelligence, however, still stuck to the idea that the Germans were going to attack the French front.

[2] There is reason for relating that Foch, on learning definitely that the general reserve proposition was doomed, expressed a desire that, reserve or no reserve, the powers and provinces of the Executive War Board should be greatly extended. He thought the Board ought to decide all matters relating, for instance, to transportation and recruitment. Now, imagine the feelings of the British War Cabinet at this or at any time had they been asked to pass on the problem of the British 'indispensables' and of man-power generally to a board presided over by an out-and-out fighting French soldier whose nation was nothing if not conscriptionist! Mercifully, Foch does not appear to have pressed this claim on the British civil power. His excitement—rather pronounced at first—wore away.

as relieved by this as any of the British army commanders who would have had to contribute to the committee.

Sir William Robertson says, on page 329 of the work quoted on p. 21, that it was imperative in January 1918 that 'strong strategical reserves should be available for use when and where required to deal with the expected German attack, and to ensure this the intervention of some authority superior to the British and French Commanders-in-Chief was necessary.' One hesitates to criticise any statement on the subject by so logical and loyal a soldier, perfectly sincere, versed in the science of war. Yet the statement does not make it clear how quick unanimity in the handling of the proposed reserve was likely to be reached by a deliberative committee of four nations, even supposing this authority to be built up from the existing chiefs of staff instead of being furnished by Versailles. Committees are no doubt necessary for all manner of modern war-work in the way of production at home, etc. But a committee of nations employed to manipulate a body of troops when swift decision is the supreme need—what confidence could there be in January and February 1918 that this would be secured by any plan propounded at Versailles or elsewhere ? [1]

The retort may be made that, as things turned out, a swift decision in regard to reserves was not afforded on March 21. But that is no reply to the question. Moreover,

[1] But committees for producing war material and committees for engaging in the management of war operations are on different planes. The former may often be in their element, the latter are naturally out of it. Thus it was a committee, a committee of the Cabinet, which insisted in putting Nivelle over Haig at a ludicrous time, *i.e.* just when Nivelle was going wrong in regard to the Hindenburg Retreat. He seems, roughly, to have been made Generalissimo on the strength of views held in December 1916, which at the close of February 1917 were all out of date. It had taken two months for the strong French feeling in favour of Nivelle and his scheme in December 1916 and for the intrigues against Haig to induce this war committee of the Cabinet to act. By this kind of committee action in the conduct of war ' you get a situation '—writes a friend who was behind the military scheme at the time—' like a bad dream, when one's limbs refuse to move till about five minues after the reason for their moving has gone, and then, obedient to the original impulse, insist on moving, regardless of the consequences.'

though the slowness with which the French reserves came on the scene then was distressful, the British front was not so attenuated as it would have been had the absurd Versailles project been adopted.

On March 21 the French fully expected that the enemy was about to make a great attack on their own lines. Hence the tardy arrival of their reserves on the Somme battlefield. Hence, later, the delay even in the arrival of their troops on the Lys battlefield, as we shall find when we reach that crisis. How can we take it for granted that a deliberative committee standing for four different nations would in March or even April swiftly and unanimously have resolved to overlook a menace, imaginary or not, to the French front—or to Paris—and immediately to hand over the bulk of its reserves to the British leader ? That is where Foch's and Sir William Robertson's original plan, and after that Mr. Lloyd George's Versailles one, were alike weak.

The general proposition that a strong reserve of divisions is invaluable for defensive purposes, or for exploitation in offence, is accepted by every one. No reasonable person could question it. But to thin out your front to the breaking-point in order to set apart such a reserve and place it in the hands of a war committee composed of four different nations is another proposition. In this particular case it has always to be remembered that, on a large proportion of the British front, a break-through quickly effected by a massed enemy attack might well have proved fatal. Only on the old Somme battlefield, and—to a much less degree—on the Lys, could we give ground at all. An enemy break-through in the Ypres area, for instance, would have been fatal in March 1918 as in October 1914. There were people so entranced by the idea of a general reserve that they could not imagine a decisive victory by the enemy, provided the Allies had this weapon : for even if the enemy broke clean through and forced us to the Channel ports, it would be ' quite all right '—the general reserve would come up in the nick of time and break the enemy ! But that is carrying belief in such a weapon to tomfoolery. It takes no account

of the effect of moral on even the finest troops in certain situations. For instance, the enemy was preparing for an attack in the north of the British front where to give way to any extent must have forced us back on the Channel ports. It was probable that through the nature of the ground this attack would not take place very early in the year, but we could not be certain—we were bound to take it into consideration, be on our guard against it. If we had thinned our defensive front there, as we should have been compelled to do, in order to contribute substantially to a general reserve, we should have risked a catastrophe which might easily have proved irreparable.

Only a clever fool could visualise such a disaster, with the utter confusion to communications and the blow to moral that must result, and yet feel confident the general reserve would speedily retrieve the position and shatter the enemy.

The disaster which did occur on the Somme was very grave. But if the Germans, instead of launching their attack there on March 21, had deferred it for a fortnight, and struck farther north with their full force on a thinned line,[1] they might well have reached a decision in spite of the existence of a general reserve handled by a Versailles or other committee. It is true the British Commander-in-Chief was compelled before the end of March to withdraw divisions from the northern area in order to save the situation in front of Amiens, and there was danger in taking this step, but at any rate the chief German blow had fallen by then, and Ludendorff had received an exceedingly heavy repulse, thanks to General Horne, in the second Battle of Arras on March 28, 1918. The notion that, with a general reserve in being, an enemy break-through would not matter—for the enemy must expose a flank to its attack to be thereby himself destroyed. —is not to be taken seriously. It is the *reductio ad absurdum* of the theory of a strategical reserve.

Before leaving this subject of a reserve to be administered by an international committee, it may be well to recapitulate

[1] We are here assuming the general reserve project had been carried out.

a few points and also describe the position on the British front when the proposal was started.

The British line of 125 miles of hard-fighting front was then being held by 58 British divisions and 2 Portuguese divisions. The latter were not, candidly, of high value; and if we examine the disposition of all British divisions after the Battle of the Lys we find that they never came into line again. When the Prime Minister spoke of the British front being 'over-insured' in France, and produced figures to point his argument, he seems to have forgotten certain weak points. At the same time he probably forgot that opposite our front the Germans massed the best of their fighting men. They did this in 1916, 1917 and 1918. The map in the *Despatches* showing the grouping and massing of German divisions on September 25, 1918, for instance, shows that the enemy not only packed his divisions thickly into the front opposite ours, but packed the best of his divisions there. There were only Germans opposite us. The Austrian troops, very inferior, he put on non-British portions of the front. He put a solitary Landwehr division opposite our front: the whole of the rest of this quite inferior type of German division he distributed along non-British parts of the line.

Thus the Prime Minister's argument of over-insurance was defective: it too much resembled the arguments of various French writers and leaders, who often appear to have classed Ypres or Arras sectors of the line with those in Alsace-Lorraine.

Of these 58 British divisions 40 were in line, 10 were in reserve at the disposal of the army commanders, 8 were in reserve at the disposal of the Commander-in-Chief; and our divisions were down to 10 battalions apiece. Opposite our front lay 40 German divisions in line with 47 in reserve —also of 10 battalions apiece. That is to say, excluding the Portuguese, we with our 58 were faced by 87 German divisions. Besides, 30 other German divisions, then in reserve, were available for transfer, if required, to our front.

From Houthulst Forest to Arras our front had a mean depth of 55 miles between front line and coast. Retreat was out of the question, and there was no room for manœuvre. Therefore we must hold it in strength—and certainly our troops were none too many for that purpose.

Successful defence of this front must depend on the timely arrival of reserves, and the intimate knowledge of the commanders and their staffs of the ground to be operated on.

Taking the whole British front, on an average, 5500 yards were held by a British division, as compared with an average of 3000 yards held by a German division in a defensive battle. This did not point to our being over-insured in France against an enemy attack in the spring of 1918.

When the proposition for a general reserve was started it found, as we have seen, an ardent advocate in Foch ; and it is no secret that early in March, when the British Commander-in-Chief's refusal to contribute to it was received, Foch, at Versailles, showed considerable annoyance. But that was before the German offensive, at any rate. Does any person of intelligence and authority still hold, seriously, that Haig ought to have stripped his front to please Versailles ? In the light of March 21, it is now clear, and no doubt accepted by all save a few eccentric individuals, that the British Commander-in-Chief was right, and that Foch, Versailles and its supporters were wrong. But, at the time, this view was not universal. All sorts of people were carried away by the idea. It seemed on the face of it so clever. So that the British Commander-in-Chief had by no means an easy task to defeat the perilous proposal. The position was delicate. It called for circumspection. Pétain must have experienced the difficulty of the position : for he was driven into earmarking French divisions for the general reserve. Diaz had also responded favourably. It was the British Commander-in-Chief's disagreeable rôle to stand out alone for the sake of the safety of the Allied cause and on behalf of every commander of an army.[1]

[1] It is interesting to recall the strong criticisms at times levelled at

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For the rest, the leaders on the spot, who knew their duties and who knew the ground, and they alone, can be trusted to decide exactly when and where reserves shall be used. Unity and homogeneity are indispensable in the formation of a reserve, and such a force can only be appointed and handled by a responsible commander. Into a battle as we know it to-day—often a struggle drawn out for many weeks—are drawn the army reserves and the commander-in-chief's reserves. The latter are not to be thrown suddenly into the vast arena of a modern battle, and very likely at first they produce no decisive effect during the preliminary stage, the *bataille d'usure*. These reserves are not only for meeting the unforeseen in a battle, but are also invaluable for securing a rotation of divisions, so that as divisions grow exhausted they can be withdrawn and refitted and reserve divisions put in their places. Only the man who is directly responsible for the conduct of operations, and alone has full knowledge of the conditions, can decide when exactly these reserves should be used. So that the rôle of the reserve is clean outside the ability of any inter-allied or international committee.

How these obvious facts escaped the notice of the soldiers who at Versailles pressed for a committee-controlled, international reserve may well appear inexplicable: at any rate it is unnecessary to examine their motives here. Its civilian supporters probably did not study the question at all: they may excuse themselves by saying that they left such a technical matter to the soldiers whose duty it was to advise them.

G.H.Q.—even by subordinate British commanders—for holding divisions in G.H.Q. reserve instead of leaving them to the armies. How much more pointed such criticisms would have been had the divisions been allotted to a general reserve controlled by a French-Italian-British-American committee.

CHAPTER V

GERMANY'S GREATEST BATTLE

(By J. H. B.)

Looking back, the German reaction at Cambrai on November 30, 1917, stands out clear and menacing as a danger-signal to the Allies. Ever since the British citizen armies had entered into the conflict in July 1916, thereby opening up the second of the two great divisions into which the story of the Allied operations on the Western Front falls, we had been accustomed to meet resolute and at times successful opposition, to make slow if methodical advances, to encounter fierce and frequent counter-attacks. The events of November 30, 1917, were in an entirely different category. On that day the enemy had not merely endeavoured to defend or regain his own defensive positions. He had made a definite attempt upon the security of the British line, and he had come perilously near success. That the German quarry we had so steadily and persistently hunted from one shelter to another throughout eighteen strenuous months should from time to time turn at bay was natural enough. That he should fling round upon his pursuers and for a few brief tumultuous hours hunt them was a new experience and came as a distinct shock.

It was a shock, however, which had more significance for those responsible for the direction of the Army than for the fighting rank and file. So far as the latter were concerned, a habit of mind formed by so long a series of successful British attacks could not be changed by a single incident such as Cambrai, affecting as it did but a small portion of the whole Army, and moreover resulting, when all was said and done, in a substantial balance of advantage in our

hands. At the end of 1917, the general feeling on the part of the fighting troops was one of weariness and irritation, perhaps, but not of discouragement or disquietude. Their confidence in themselves was as high as ever, and took in no more kindly fashion than was at any time characteristic of the British soldier to the digging of trenches and construction of defences.

Those responsible, however, for the military conduct of affairs could not but realise that the circumstances of the German attack on the Vendhuille–Masnières front called for close and anxious investigation. Our methods of defence in general, and more particularly on the front of the left brigade of the 55th Division, where our troops were holding ground that had been in our possession since the early part of the year, had, as we have explained in the account of the Battle of Cambrai, been modelled upon the elastic system that the Germans had developed in their endeavour to find an effective answer to our own attacks. Our line was held in depth by a series of posts requiring the employment of a minimum of troops for the length of front covered, but sited so that they could sweep the whole front with their combined fire and so support each other. This system, which the enemy had employed with considerable effect, in our hands had broken down at the first assault. In the early hours of a misty November day, the strong points had been masked by a concentrated fire composed in large proportion of gas and smoke shells, and within a short period of the commencement of the battle had found themselves surrounded and attacked in flank and rear. What was the explanation ? Had we failed to assimilate fully the essentials of the elastic system of defence, or had the enemy developed a form of attack different from our own and more suited than ours to discover and exploit the weak points of a system which we had found so formidable ?

The latter explanation required that credence should be given to theories largely based upon conjecture, or suggested by the reports of men who had narrowly escaped capture. These latter admittedly were witnesses at first

hand, but their knowledge was by their own showing confined to what took place in their immediate vicinity, and their views would inevitably be coloured by the emotions of the moment. It is human for a man who has escaped out of great danger to dwell upon the perils he has undergone, and stories of the enemy advancing in masses at one point and of the sudden appearance at another of large bodies of his troops in rear of British posts that had successfully beaten off frontal attacks had not been so unknown in previous fights that they could be received without caution as indicating a departure from recognised methods of assault. On the other hand, it was easy to believe that our troops—trained as they had been for so long almost exclusively for attack—had failed to put into practice with sufficient skill and completeness a method of defence which they had had little or no time to learn. Moreover, no system is proof against surprise, and it was generally accepted that locally at any rate our troops had been taken by surprise.

The lesson of the Cambrai incident, therefore, combined with the knowledge that in the coming spring the enemy would be in a superiority on the Western Front, was taken to be that during the winter the greatest care would have to be given to training the troops in the new defensive tactics and to reorganising our defensive works on up-to-date lines. It would be necessary, in particular, to impress upon local commanders the supreme importance of not departing from the spirit of the instructions given them in the matter of thinning down the forward or outpost zone—a thing they were somewhat prone to do, being more closely in touch with the feelings of their men and realising in more personal manner the strain that loneliness imposes upon the bravest. With this effort to improve and, if time allowed, perfect our elastic defence system, both as regards training of personnel and the construction of material defences, was to be coupled the utmost vigilance to obviate any chance of being taken by surprise in the future.

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The responsibility for keeping watch upon and interpreting the enemy's intentions lay upon the Intelligence Service. A really full and frank history of the development and work of the British Intelligence Service in France would be of extraordinary interest. Nothing of the kind can be attempted here, but a brief outline of some of the work that 'I' did will help not a little to clear up a few of the misconceptions that have gathered round the greatest of all British defensive battles. Necessarily superficial and incomplete, it will yet serve, it is hoped, to indicate how it was that the Commander-in-Chief was able to state in his despatch that towards the middle of February 1918 it had become evident that the enemy was preparing for a big offensive on the Western Front, and that by the end of that month he had determined the sector in which in all probability the offensive would be delivered.

The imagination and energy of Brigadier-General John Charteris, who early in 1916 had succeeded General Macdonogh as Chief of the Intelligence Department in France, had been quick to perceive the possibilities of the important service entrusted to his charge, and prompt to develop the organisation necessary to a proper performance of its duties. In his hands 'Intelligence' grew rapidly, both numerically as regards the number of officers employed on this special work, and also as regards the position held by it relatively to the other departments of the General Staff. By the end of 1917 there had been established in France a complete Intelligence hierarchy, operating through all armies, formations and services, with offshoots and branch establishments of various kinds on the lines of communication, and agents everywhere, including the areas of France and Belgium in German occupation. Intelligence officers of various military grades and all known civilian occupations pervaded the whole of the British zone, overflowed into Switzerland, and interchanged views and information with the Intelligence departments of our different Allies. At its head and centre, the 'B-G.I,' recipient and assimilator of information from a hundred and one sources of varying reliability or

unreliability, wielded a power and influence much in excess of that usually associated with the rank of brigadier-general. Always in close touch with the 'Operations Section' of the General Staff—by origin indeed a part of it—the functions of the Intelligence 'sub-section' were to supply 'Operations' with an important part of the material upon which 'Operations' based their plans. The views of the B-G.I., therefore, necessarily reacted powerfully upon those of the chiefs of 'Operations.' He it was who with the greatest show of reason could claim to be able to say what it was that the enemy was doing on the other side of the hill.

The first duty of 'Intelligence' was to maintain an up-to-date knowledge of the enemy's Order of Battle; that is, to be able to say from day to day what German divisions were actually opposed to us in line and where, and to what corps and armies they belonged; what German divisions were in reserve on our front, where located, and when they could be made available for the line; and, generally, what were the condition and fighting value of the different German units, and what the past careers, characters, and reputations of their respective commanders. In order to display a part of this information in easy and graphic form, 'Intelligence' issued, in addition to much other matter, and at intervals varying with the importance of the occasion and the number of changes to be recorded, special sectional maps of the fighting front. On these maps were printed in red the German divisions in line and immediate reserve, with the approximate divisional, corps, and army boundaries, and tables showing at a glance the total number of German divisions on the Western Front, in line and in reserve, and how many of the latter were exhausted by recent fighting.

Maps of this kind, if they were to be of any value, had to be accurate. All possible pains were taken to make them so, and when captured documents enabled their degree of accuracy to be checked, it was invariably found to be high. Raids provided the principal means of getting the necessary information, and in any sector where 'Intelligence' scented the possibility of a change in the enemy's dispositions,

requests for raids would come down to the British unit concerned in quick succession, until a raid had been carried out and an identification, preferably living, obtained. Raids had been an accepted policy of the British Army from the date of the change of command at the end of 1915 onwards. They can fairly be claimed as a British contribution to the tactics of trench warfare, and though the French and Germans followed our example, neither Allies nor enemies could ever rival our activity and success in this direction. It followed that our information regarding the German dispositions on our front was peculiarly complete and up-to-date.

Inevitably, a large part of the energies of ' I ' were directed to the interrogation of prisoners. This was an art in itself, particularly so seeing that the cruder methods of extorting information practised by our ancestors were ruled out in the British Army. Devices for overhearing the casual talk of prisoners, the leading of prisoners to believe that they could speak freely among themselves when one of their number was in fact in our pay, cross-examination harsh or confidential according to the type of prisoner to be experimented upon, the familiar trick of pretending that we already knew all the prisoner had to tell and that therefore secrecy was ridiculous, all these various means of eliciting information were employed freely and successfully. Direct information of this kind was obviously the best, though even here caution had to be exercised ; for the statements of prisoners as to the units they had seen when in rest billets or when moving across Germany or up to the line, or as to the stories they had heard regarding troop movements actual or projected, were open to genuine error on the part of the informant, as well as the possibility of deliberate misstatement. Practical experiments made upon our own men by questioning them regarding the British troops in their vicinity usually gave most discouraging results, and the general ignorance of our troops regarding such matters must have caused much annoyance to the German Intelligence Staff when British prisoners were brought before

them. As far as German prisoners were concerned, however, the habits and knowledge engendered by many years of pre-war conscription stood us in good stead. The knowledge of the average German private as to the German formations in his neighbourhood was, by comparison with corresponding knowledge on the part of the average British citizen soldier, excellently good, and our Intelligence Service profited accordingly.

Then there was the 'listening set,' a method of overhearing, by means of special electrical apparatus of great sensitiveness, the telephone conversations carried on by the enemy in his front line, and even for some distance behind it. This was a German invention, and gave us much trouble till we discovered what was happening. The necessary precautions were then taken to avoid giving away our own secrets, and we in turn installed instruments wherewith to glean what we could from the indiscretions of the enemy.

News of what was taking place in areas behind the line was gained chiefly by aeroplane ; or by carrier pigeons, or even wireless, released or operated by Belgian or French agents in the occupied territory. The lives these agents lived were precarious in the extreme, and their method of getting in or out of the occupied area highly exciting. Occasionally they were dropped from aeroplanes, and at least one story was current of an unfortunate agent, whose nerve failed him at the last moment, being ruthlessly forced to let go his hold by being beaten over the fingers with the butt of a pistol by an unsympathetic pilot. Not infrequently the succession of messages received from some particular agent would be abruptly interrupted, and we would be left to conjecture the fate of the sender.

Information from agents largely concerned train movements and like matters. As a rule it reached us late, but was of considerable use none the less as affording confirmation or the reverse of conclusions drawn from other sources. Aeroplane reconnaissance was invaluable, and the comparison of photographs of given localities taken from

aeroplanes at frequent intervals over long periods of time, showing the changes effected by the enemy in his organisation, roads, railways, dumps, etc., provided most important evidence of projected offensive operations. Occasionally photos or reports of troops or transport actually seen upon the roads, or of trains in movement, could be obtained in this way ; but changes in the aspect of the ground, the construction of new defensive lines or the neglect of such construction and the sudden appearance of assault trenches, an increase in the number of batteries, or the removal of guns from batteries previously located and known to be active, the multiplication of cross-country tracks, the growth in the size and number of dumps, even an apparent increase in the size of woods of known shape and area—proving the activity of the enemy's camouflage department—all these different pieces of information that experts could gain from a comparison of aeroplane photos furnished information of the utmost importance ; sometimes amounting to conclusive evidence upon the vital point whether the enemy's intentions in any particular sector were offensive or defensive.

Trustworthy information from this source could be gained, however, only where aeroplane activity had been steadily and continuously maintained for a considerable period of time. Otherwise there was no proper basis for comparison. When the Fifth British Army took over from the French from north of St. Quentin to Barisis in February 1918, our aeroplane photos showed several aerodromes and other data of importance behind the new front which were not indicated at all on the French maps and photos of the district. Any inferences to be drawn from these observations were much weakened, however, by the fact that a number of these unmarked aerodromes had existed to common knowledge for many months previously. There was accordingly nothing definite to show how many of those appearing in our photos had in fact been recently constructed and how many were really old and were marked on our maps as new merely because the French had failed to record their appearance in the first instance. On this occasion,

accumulating evidence from various sources gradually removed all doubts regarding the enemy's intentions, a part of this evidence being an observed increase in the number and activity of the enemy's wireless stations along the Fifth and Third Army fronts, as well as the appearance of a number of new hospitals and prisoners' cages.

Wireless stations were employed by all belligerents to a greater and greater extent as the war proceeded and formed an indication of considerable value. The weakness of the wireless station was that it could not help advertising its existence, or even, as time went on and more skilful methods of detection were employed, its approximate position—thus serving to point out the general location of a headquarters of some kind. On the other hand, both the Germans and ourselves were known to make a great display of wireless activity in one sector for the express purpose of distracting attention from some other. The indications given from wireless activity, therefore, as indeed all the different indications upon which the conclusions of 'I' were based, were valuable in proportion as they were confirmed by others. All had to be most carefully weighed and balanced one against another, and the nature of the indications themselves closely scrutinised.

In this way, for example, reports of increasing wireless activity on one part of the front might be found on investigation to be based upon a larger number of calls being sent out from a smaller number of stations, while in another sector, where activity appeared to be normal, the calls sent out might be found to proceed from an unusually large number of stations. Examination of the calls themselves might reveal that in the former area many of the messages were private conversations or unnecessary and meaningless, while an unusual percentage in the latter area might prove to be opening or testing calls from stations that otherwise gave little or no sign of their existence. Behind one sector an increase in the number of active German aerodromes would be remarked; behind another it would perhaps be noticed that consecutive photographs of an aerodrome

registered as active all showed a machine apparently just about to take off from one particular corner of the aerodrome. Suspicion would be aroused, and closer inspection from the air might reveal the fact that the aeroplane shown in the photo was an old machine left in the open to deceive British observers, and that the aerodrome was in fact abandoned. Analysed in this or some like manner suited to the case, it was often possible to discriminate between real and spurious activity, and so to fix within comparatively narrow limits the actual area of danger.

The more extensive use of wireless led to a corresponding expansion of the section of the Intelligence Service engaged in deciphering intercepted code messages. Speed was of the essence of the business, for the message might be one requiring immediate counter-measures to be taken by us. Great speed and certainty were in fact attained, and ultimately there were few code messages for the solution and interpretation of which more than a few hours were needed. Allied with the staff engaged in this work were the Intelligence officers whose duty it was to put into code or decode, as the case might be, our own secret messages. Their life was an arduous one, for no hour of the day or night could they safely reckon their own. Moreover, from the nature of their duties they were denied even that spurious form of mental relaxation that comes from talking 'shop.' Never was there a closer or more secretive body of men, so far as their duties were concerned.

With one or two exceptions, such as the 106 fuse, the Germans were ahead of us in the design of shells and fuses. There was an officer with a wide and agreeable smile and an astonishing command of the French language who, while ostensibly leading a safe and peaceful life at G.H.Q., spent the major portion of his time wandering over eruptive battlefields in search of new forms of German shells and fuses, and his leisure hours in the even more perilous pastime of taking his treasure-trove to pieces. In 1916 a man was called in to look after carrier pigeons, and was at first attached to 'I.' He was, it is believed, a stockbroker by

trade, but he took to pigeons wonderfully. His charges multiplied exceedingly, and mobile pigeon-lofts—a sort of cross between a Black Maria and a gipsy caravan—became common objects on the roads. The collection of information, and its repression or judicious dissemination are kindred things, and censorship and publicity accordingly formed part of the cares of the Chief of Intelligence. An attentive finger was kept upon the pulse of our own Army, and the over-exuberance of journalists was maintained in some sort of control. Finally, distinguished strangers and civilians visiting the British zone were provided by the ever watchful 'I' with food, housing, cars, guides and modulated excitement.

This brief sketch touches but the fringe of the activities of 'Intelligence.' All forms of information regarding the enemy were its concern, his strength or weakness, practices, intentions, hopes or fears, his latest devices in death-dealing instruments, his opinion upon and reports of our own newest inventions, the moral and discipline and stamina of the German Army, the moral, politics, and daily food of the German nation. In the winter of 1916-1917 a report reached G.H.Q. that the enemy had discovered an inflammable gas heavier than air, which could be made to fill trenches and dugouts and then be fired by incendiary shells. The report was kept very secret, for fear of its effect upon the troops. To-day one may wonder whether its origin was not due to some half-comprehended account of the burning effects and persistent character of mustard gas, overheard and forwarded to us by one of our many agents. The ingenious and attractive myth regarding the conversion of dead Germans into soup and soap originated, it is believed, in the fertile imagination of the Information department at home.[1]

[1] The story was momentarily revived when, on the capture of Bellicourt tunnel in September 1918, the head of a German soldier was found in a soup cauldron in a kitchen within the tunnel. Special investigation showed that its presence in such ambiguous surroundings was due to the vagaries of high explosive.

By the end of 1917, the Intelligence section of the General Staff had not only grown into a great department with ramifications extending all through the Army and all over the British zone and beyond, but it was also a highly efficient service, probably considerably the most efficient Intelligence Service on the Western Front. It was in these circumstances that General Charteris was removed from his position as head of the Intelligence Service, to find a home later under the Director-General of Transportation and to be succeeded ultimately as Chief of Intelligence by Brigadier-General E. W. Cox, a younger, less assertive but no less able officer whose accidental death a few months later was a great loss to the British Army. The reasons for this change need not now be gone into, further than to say that an undoubtedly important one was that General Charteris believed the German Army to be as near defeat at the end of 1916 as Ludendorff has since declared it to have been. The change resulted in no loss of efficiency in the department, the most noticeable difference to the outside observer being that whereas optimism had been the prevailing note of the previous regime, the new seemed at times to dwell almost unduly upon the dark side of things.

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Certainly caution was eminently desirable in the opening months of 1918. Throughout the winter the British Intelligence Service, in close touch with the Intelligence Services of our Allies, had watched the gradual development of the German strength in the west. Division after division had been traced across Germany and located with greater or less precision, as the case might be, either in line or close reserve, or in training areas behind the fighting zones. What had been so long foreseen materialised beneath our gaze. The German power in the west first equalled and then exceeded the combined strengths of the Allies, and the composite Allied Armies, with all their wide differences in temperament, equipment and fighting value, were confronted by a substantially superior and homogeneous force.

It remained to determine what use the enemy would make of his superiority. Would he use it to strengthen his hand for bargaining, perhaps striking here and there at chosen points and with carefully limited objectives to show his power and point his arguments for peace ; or would he 'go all out,' and make a resolute and determined bid for victory at the eleventh hour ?

Reason, divorced from all questions of personal or national character, undoubtedly pointed to the first course, and there were not wanting those who thought that this was the line of action Germany would follow. A general, however, cannot afford to disregard the psychology of his opponents. Opinion at British G.H.Q., and, it is believed, throughout the staffs of all the higher formations of the Army, had few doubts upon the subject. It was felt to be as certain as anything in war can be that the enemy would attack, and with all his force.

Where would he attack, and when, and what were our chances of resistance ? A section of military thought, basing their conclusions upon the results of a 'War Game' played at Versailles during the winter months, believed that the enemy would postpone his attack till June or July, and would then have a choice of two points of attack, the one in the Reims sector, if he decided to operate against the French, and the other in the Arras–Lens sector if he decided to strike the British. The reasons for selecting this date were that —it being assumed that the Germans had made up their minds to risk all on a supreme blow—they would require as long as possible to complete their arrangements ; above all, to perfect the training of their troops, including all the troops that could possibly be spared from the Russian and other fronts. If the attack were made in the early spring, some divisions might not have arrived from the east ; or, if they had arrived, would have had no time to be trained in western methods. It was argued, therefore, that the enemy would wait as long as he dared, having regard to the time when the American Army might be expected to become a force to be reckoned with seriously. This would not be

till the middle of the summer or early autumn.[1] As to the localities suggested, it was understood that the Reims sector of the German line was fully prepared for offensive operations, and the threat to Paris was more direct there than elsewhere. Paris was always at the back of the French military mind, and of the minds of those who drew their military inspiration largely from French sources, influencing their judgment. If, however, it should happen that the attack was destined to fall on the British, the splendid rail facilities behind the German line in the Lens sector, the opportunities for massing troops unobserved in a closely built-over district and the importance of the objectives to be gained there on the British side of the line by even a short advance, were held to point to this sector above all as the one where the British might expect to be attacked.

The view taken at British G.H.Q., where a War Game of another character had been proceeding continuously for three and a half years, was an entirely different one, both as to time and place. It was a view based not merely upon theory, or upon reports which—by the time they reached Versailles—must have been already largely out of date, but upon observation, close, continuous, and intelligent ; upon the work, in short, of ' I ' aided by the experience of local fighting commanders in sifting and valuing facts, and ultimately interpreted by the profound sagacity and quick, clear-sighted intuition of the British Commander-in-Chief.

As the winter wore on towards a reluctant close, a steadily accumulating number of observed indications pointed first to the extreme probability and finally to the certainty that the St. Quentin–Cambrai front had been chosen for the opening scene of the coming struggle ; while the nature of those indications put it beyond reasonable doubt that the blow would be delivered soon. What those indications were can be gathered sufficiently from the short description

[1] It may be noted in passing that German propagandists were still discussing how many tons of shipping would be required to bring a million Americans to the Western Front and maintain them there, and arguing that the shipping problem made the feat impossible, at a time when that number of United States troops were already in Europe.

already given of the work of the Intelligence Section. So far as the need to guard against surprise was concerned, the lesson of Cambrai had been well learnt and skilfully applied. Only one element of doubt remained. In the course of three years of more or less stationary warfare, the enemy had been able so to equip practically his whole front that, without much further preparation, a powerful assault might be launched at short notice from almost any part of it. It could not altogether be determined before the battle opened, and the extent of the forces committed to it had been definitely ascertained by contact, whether, first, the St. Quentin–Cambrai attack would be preceded or accompanied by demonstrations in force on other fronts, as for example against the exposed British position on the Paschendaele Ridge, and second, whether the powerful blow known to be coming in the south might not be intended in the German plan to be the prelude to a stroke in comparable force elsewhere. This last doubt was removed within a few hours of the opening of the battle.

The G.H.Q. view of the enemy's intentions, founded, as has been seen, primarily upon his observed actions, was strengthened by other considerations. The suggestion that Germany would wait until June before making her supreme effort depended upon too many suppositions and was contrary to all the experience of the war. There was no reason to believe that Germany would deem it necessary to delay until the last man had been brought across from the Russian front and trained. A large body of highly-trained troops would certainly be necessary for the opening blow; but these were already available and actually training, and once the British line had been broken gaps in the German ranks could be filled if need be by less carefully trained divisions. Further, the date by which the American Army would be fit for major operations was not the one upon which the German leaders could safely found their plans. Many months before that date American troops could be used to hold quiet portions of the line, and set free for the battle more experienced Allied divisions. Further, what guarantee

had Ludendorff that the situation of the Allied Armies as regards man-power would not improve before June ? Convinced Westerner as he was, could he have credited the British Government with the intention of leaving our threatened line in the west permanently below strength, in order that troops might be available for a subsidiary operation in Palestine ? It would have been more reasonable for him to suppose that arrangements had already been made to bring large reinforcements to France.

An early attack made Flanders an unlikely theatre for the main operation, though it could not altogether be ruled out of account. For reasons already explained, wherever else we had to take risks, we could not afford to take them in Flanders. The Passchendaele operations had left us in a position there favourable for a continued offensive, but very difficult for defence. It followed that our line in the north was necessarily strong with troops. In the centre, our line was strong by the nature of our positions and because, being central, it could most easily be rapidly reinforced. The right of our line was clearly and unavoidably our weakest point ; as regards men because our recently extended line made it necessary for divisions to hold wide fronts ; as regards positions because our defences were for the most part new and incomplete ; as regards communications because roads and railways had all had to be constructed afresh after the German Retreat in the spring of 1917. The enemy could be trusted to know all this as well as we knew it ourselves. In addition, behind the devastated area lay the biggest objective in France from the German point of view—namely, the capture of Amiens, the occupation of the lower Somme valley and the separation of the French and British Armies. The prize offered by a successful attack at this point was bigger than either Paris or the Channel ports, for it included both.

The St. Quentin–Cambrai front held out also the no small advantage which the inevitable lack of cohesion between defending armies of different race and tongue must always give to the homogeneous attacker. Against all these

reasons why the enemy might be expected to select this front for his operation could be set only one serious disadvantage, namely, the obstacle offered by the wide extent of devastated country which the Germans themselves had laid waste only a year previously.

There were, therefore, ample theoretical arguments to back the conclusions which the British leader had drawn from the facts daily reported to him. Events were shortly to prove him right both as to time and the place of the attack. Was he wrong in his calculations of the chances of successful resistance ?

It can safely be said that the general opinion prior to March 21 was that, though the right of our line was admittedly weaker than was desirable, it was yet strong enough to break up the German attack and ultimately to hold it before the enemy had made progress deep enough seriously to endanger the position of the British Armies. The possibility that we might be compelled to fall back behind the devastated area had been recognised. Full value, indeed, had been given to the difficulties the enemy would experience in supporting an offensive across this region, and careful preparations had been made to add to the obstacles before him by the destruction of roads and bridges.[1] The existence of this broad belt of desolate country covering our right naturally influenced the general disposition of the British Armies, and helped materially to make it possible to contemplate the future with confidence despite our extended

[1] It may be mentioned that the charges for destroying certain bridges across the canal had been placed in position by the French. None of these charges was effective when the time came. These bridges were by arrangement left to the French to destroy. Something went wrong with the French arrangements, and they ultimately had to be destroyed by the British with fresh charges at the last moment. Some 250 bridges of all kinds were destroyed by us in the Fifth Army area. There were only two important failures, at Ham and at Chipilly where the charges failed to have the desired effect. The destruction of the road bridges appears to have been remarkably successful. The railway bridges were not dealt with by the Army, but by the Railway Staff, under orders of Transportation G.H.Q. This would seem to have been a mistake, as the Army was necessarily more closely in touch with events.

line and reduced forces. Much reliance was placed, too, upon our new system of defence in depth with its resultant economy of men, although it was known that neither the training of the divisions in the new methods of defensive warfare nor the construction of the defences themselves could be satisfactorily completed in the time and with the resources at our disposal. The bridgehead positions covering the Somme crossings, and even much of the third or rear zone of our main defences, were little more than marked out. Our principal efforts were concentrated upon completing the forward and battle zones, or rather upon bringing them as near completion as modern defences can ever be. In the light of our own experience when attacking elastic defences organised in depth it was considered that, even though the forward zone might be temporarily overrun or even permanently lost over wide sectors, the resistance of our garrisons there would so disorganise the attack that the battle zone would be able to make good its defence ; or at any rate to hold out for a sufficient space of time to enable the strength of the enemy's effort to be gauged, to allow divisions to be brought up from fronts no longer threatened, and further progress to be made with our rearward defences.

So far as the British Higher Command counted upon the devastated area to enable them ultimately to stop the enemy before his advance had brought irretrievable disaster to our forces, the event was once more to prove them right in their calculations and so justify the dispositions they had made. The enemy was stopped, and, as will be shown, stopped by the British Army fighting under an independent British leader, before the goal of his strategic plan had been reached ; and this despite the breakdown of plans for French co-operation upon which the British Commander-in-Chief had every right to rely. It is curious how often this salient fact is overlooked. So far, however, as reliance was placed upon the elastic system of defence either to defeat the attack at once or to give us time to readjust the general disposition of our troops, it would seem that one

possibility was disregarded. Despite the lesson of Cambrai, it does not appear to have been foreseen that conditions might arise or be artificially created in which the 'elasticity' of a defence organised in depth would cease to exist. Our lines were held by a series of posts and defended localities sited so as to be able to give each other mutual support by the crossing fire of machine guns and artillery. Their strength lay in their power to co-operate. To employ an age-old simile, in clear weather our defensive zones, knit together by the skilful arrangement of their fields of fire and careful provision for counter-attacks, represented the pliant bundle of twigs that, when bound together, could successfully resist all attempts to break it. In fog such as that which on March 21 blinded our observers, machine gunners and artillery, the bonds that held the different zones together fell away and each separate system with each separate defended post within it—like the individual sticks of which the bundle had been composed—stood or fell by its own strength alone. In circumstances that rendered combined action in defence practically impossible, the basic principle of the elastic method went by the board.

It is right to add that only the presence of additional British divisions in line or close reserve could have cured this defect in our system of defence, and there were no more British divisions available in France.

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Round the questions of the influence of fog upon the operations of March 21 and 22 centres one of the minor controversies of the battle. It involves problems of defence tactics of no small importance, and accordingly a more detailed consideration of it will not be out of place before the general course of the battle itself is reviewed. Was the dense fog which covered the battlefield on the morning of March 21—it may be remarked in passing that it was the first really misty morning that had been experienced in that district for two months past—of greater disadvantage to the attackers or to the attacked? Ludendorff, who can hardly be expected readily to attribute to chance and

accident the credit for the greatest of his successes, writes that while most thought it hindered the attack, some few thought it was an advantage. It appeared at the time to be the universal opinion of the British troops engaged that the fog was an overwhelming handicap to the defence and an immense assistance to the enemy. General Gough, whose opinion commands respect, holds that the fog was at first, say for a couple of hours, a great disadvantage to the defence. 'Had it not been present, many of our machine guns, very skilfully hidden, would have taken a terrible toll. It is possible—but, considering the immense superiority of the German numbers, hardly probable—that this toll might have repulsed the attack. But as soon as the foe had broken through the first lines of resistance and was pushing on, he must have found that command, co-operation and communication became increasingly difficult. Then—so I think—it is quite true that the fog was a very serious hindrance to the Hun.' [1]

Let us for a moment compare the position of attackers and attacked in a fog that limits vision to a distance of some fifty yards, not forgetting to consider the influence of the tactics employed on either side. It is obvious that when the defence consists, not of a continuous trench line, garrisoned more or less strongly all along its length, but of a series of posts separated from each other by gaps of varying yet always considerable width, the power to present a continuous obstacle to a hostile advance must depend upon the ability of machine gunners and artillery to learn of the attack in good time and, while the enemy is still at a distance from our positions, to sweep with their fire the areas over which he can be seen approaching. That was the principle of our defence. Machine guns were to take the place of men, and it should be remembered that on by far the greater part of the front of attack there was a broad no-man's-land. Next imagine conditions in which not only are the defenders unable to see the enemy leave his trenches and

[1] *The Fifth Army, March 1918*, by W. Shaw Sparrow, p. 59. (John Lane.)

advance across no-man's-land, but their range of vision is so limited that between our posts wide spaces exist by means of which the enemy can pierce our line unseen.

Turn to the attackers. If the governing idea of their tactics is an advance in line, or a series of lines, the units of which, whether individuals or small irregular groups, are accustomed to maintain connection with their flanks and to progress more or less evenly, reducing all obstacles in their path—the British method up to this time, stated in broad terms—the thick mist is an undoubted disadvantage to the attacker, as our experience had often proved. Units do not know how neighbouring units are progressing, connection and direction are alike difficult to maintain, and progress is bound to be slow even if it is not held up altogether. Consider next a system of attack based not upon an even advance and the reduction of strong points as they are encountered, but upon the rapid exploitation from the very start of weak spots in the defence and the isolation and masking of points of resistance. Suppose that, instead of being taught to maintain connection with their flanks, attacking units are told to follow easily recognisable features of the ground and to press straight on, disregarding what may happen on other parts of the battle front until, for example, the natural swing of a valley brings them in rear of the guarded hills on either side. Suppose, further, that the attack is being made in enormous strength and its main force concentrated upon chosen sectors, so that the forces so driven through the line of defence are in no danger themselves of being cut off and isolated. Then consider the effect upon attacker and attacked respectively of a mist that hides from the eyes of the defenders' machine gunners and artillery observers the advance of large bodies of men constantly reinforced from depth and guided by officers who know the lie of the land [1] and able by following the course of a stream,

[1] Many stories were current at the time illustrating the remarkably accurate knowledge that some at least of the German battalion commanders possessed of our defences, and revealing, if true, an astounding ability on their part to find their way about our positions notwithstanding the fog.

the line of a valley or a communication trench to bring their troops unseen, perhaps unshot at, to the rear of the strong points to be attacked, indeed in many cases into the midst of the defenders' guns! That was the German method followed at Cambrai and developed upon a mighty scale upon March 21.

So explained, General Gough's verdict upon the effect of the fog during the first hours of the battle is easily comprehended. That in the later stages the fog made the organisation and control of the advance difficult is very probable, just as it impeded the control and organisation of our defence. No doubt a fog artificially created, if of a sufficiently dense character and spread over an area of adequate extent, would have afforded even more favourable conditions for the attack. The enemy was prepared to endeavour to create such a fog with gas and smoke. Fog was a part of his tactics, and for this reason and because he was determined and equipped to push large bodies of troops straight ahead wherever he found a gap, with ample reserves following close upon their heels, the subsequent disadvantages arising from difficulties of control and organisation were reduced to a minimum. The distances he covered once the gaps had been made are proof of this.

Was it in fact impossible that our troops could have stopped the attack, or at least have delayed it long enough to enable reinforcements to be brought down from other fronts, even though there had been no fog? If so, then indeed it might be urged that the risks we were taking in leaving this front so lightly held in the face of an imminent and long-foreseen attack, yet with the intention of accepting battle there, were too great. That most serious risk existed cannot be denied. Its existence was the ground for Sir Douglas Haig's urgent demands for more troops prior to the battle. Yet even with the troops available it is too much to say that a resistance which would have held the enemy east of the Somme was impossible, or even hardly probable—given clear weather conditions. It is believed that it is a conclusion that must fairly, reasonably and

inevitably be drawn from the events of the fighting as a whole that, thin as they were on the ground, our troops had there been no fog would in all probability have prevented successfully a dangerous advance even by that mighty concentration of men and guns which was hurled against them in the greatest battle of the war.

CHAPTER VI

GERMANY'S GREATEST BATTLE (*Continued*)

(By J. H. B.)

Already at the beginning of March the great German offensive was believed to be imminent, and the appearance during the early days of the month of new German aerodromes, hospitals, and prisoners' cages along the threatened front proved that the decisive moment was fast approaching. Our aeroplane photos about this date began to show enormous numbers of curious objects in the open fields about St. Quentin and in other sectors. There was much speculation as to what they could be. Some thought that they were German tanks, for in certain cases tracks of mechanically propelled vehicles could be discerned in their immediate neighbourhood. They drew the attention of our long-range guns, and a series of explosions supplied what was probably the correct answer to the problem, namely, that they were dumps which the enemy no longer attempted to conceal, but endeavoured to protect by distributing the ammunition, etc., in many comparatively small and isolated stacks. There was the usual increase in aerial activity, the German aeroplanes endeavouring to keep our machines from crossing the line.

On the Fifth Army front the order 'Prepare for battle,' which involved moving reserves closer up, putting all resting guns into position and opening heavy artillery fire on the enemy's roads and batteries, was given on March 2. All divisions in reserve, cavalry and infantry, carried out staff exercises and studied the ground for counter-attack, the 50th Division in particular spending the few days at its disposal in going carefully over the area on which it was soon to

meet the enemy. On the night of March 18-19 what is believed to have been the heaviest gas cloud discharged on one occasion during the whole war was fired from projectors upon St. Quentin.

Prisoners taken on the battle front about this time all talked of the approaching attack, giving various dates for it, but chiefly about March 13 and 15. There was little infantry action, the enemy seeming anxious to avoid contact that might result in the loss of prisoners and information. More than one of our raids found that the enemy had temporarily withdrawn from his more forward posts. March 15, the most popular date for the assault, passed quietly, but on the 18th and 19th prisoners captured near St. Quentin gave March 21 as the day with much certainty. On the evening of the 20th this news was confirmed by the capture by the XVIIIth Corps of prisoners from several different German regiments all crowded together in one small sector of the front. These prisoners spoke freely of the attack to take place on the morrow, and said that the villages behind their front were all full of troops ready to pass through to exploit the expected success.

On this day General Gough had personally interviewed all his corps commanders and discussed finally the arrangements for the defence. Anxious though they must have been, there is no suggestion that they regarded their position as in any way desperate. After the bombardment had started on the morning of the 21st, General Gough again spoke personally, on the telephone, to his corps commanders and found all calm and confident. The fact was that a long and exhausting combat was anticipated, and for this reason our artillery preparation had been kept within strict limits all through this period, in order not to exhaust before the battle started stocks of ammunition that restricted communications would make it difficult to replenish. In the event, great quantities of ammunition were never fired at all. Meanwhile, on the receipt of the fresh information from the XVIIIth Corps, the British troops had been ordered to 'Stand to.'

We had accepted battle. Distinct from the general disposition of our forces, which had been adopted with an eye both to the tactical and strategic needs of our front as a whole and had already allocated 30 out of 58 infantry divisions—as well as the three cavalry divisions—to our front south of the Scarpe, the first troop movements due to the battle had already begun. Two days previously the 39th Division had been released from G.H.Q. Reserve and given to the Fifth Army, and though the other division in G.H.Q. Reserve on this front, the 20th at Guiscard, was retained until the battle had actually started on the 21st, this was our nearest reserve division to the French front and might conceivably have been needed for intervention there. In any event it was already suitably placed to support the right or the right centre of the Fifth Army.[1] The artillery of the 50th Division was moved forward on the 18th, leaving the infantry to follow later by train. On the IIIrd Corps front careful arrangements were made to bring up reserves in buses. The 8th Division had been drawn out of the line at Ypres and was under orders for the Fifth Army front, and the 41st was on the way to Albert. Once the attack had started it would be possible to gauge with reasonable accuracy the extent of the German forces committed to this battle, and so to judge to what extent it would be safe to thin out the rest of our line to feed the fighting front.

It is illuminating to contrast the disposition of the British reserves with the disposition of the French reserves. More than half of the total British forces in France were available on March 21 in line or reserve for the defence of the battle sector, and if our troops in line or reserve were thicker in the northern half of the threatened area than in the southern,

[1] In view of the criticism levelled at G.H.Q. that the Higher Command was responsible for keeping the reserve divisions on the Fifth Army front too far back, it may be pointed out that the two divisions originally in G.H.Q. Reserve on this front, the 39th near Aizecourt and the 20th near Guiscard, were respectively 10 to 14 miles across country from the front line. The 50th Division in Army Reserve was 23 miles from the line. A more correct view is believed to be that none of these divisions was too far back having regard to the scantiness of our reserves.

there were good reasons to account for this preference. In particular, the southern sector was the one where French help should reach us the sooner and elaborate arrangements had been made, on paper, for speedy French assistance. Further, as the event was to prove, the forces allotted to the northern front were barely sufficient to hold their own against the tremendous strength concentrated against them between the Flesquières salient and the Sensée. The belt of devastated land was narrower north of the Somme than to the south; and it was obvious that if an effective break-through occurred here the plight of the British Armies to the southward would be even more perilous than if their own front had been driven in.

At this date, as General Gough has already pointed out, 'the French reserves were grouped behind (*a*) Reims, (*b*) Verdun, (*c*) Belfort, to meet an attack through Switzerland.' [1] To understand the full significance of this disposition of the French, it should be borne in mind that the French were at all times kept fully informed of the results of the investigations of our Intelligence Service and of the conclusions that the British Commander-in-Chief had drawn from them. Our Allies knew weeks before March 21 that we were expecting to be attacked in force on the St. Quentin–Cambrai front. It should be remembered further that in anticipation of a great German effort the British and French commanders

[1] Preface to *The Fifth Army in 1918*, by W. Shaw Sparrow, p. xii. General Gough goes on to say that the British reserves were grouped behind Ypres and Arras. This hardly does justice to the British dispositions when so stated, for Arras was a part of the battle front, while the distance even from Ypres to Péronne is rather less than the distance from Péronne to Reims and of course enormously less than the distance from Péronne to Verdun or Belfort. The British reserves were in fact pretty evenly distributed along our whole front. The map of British dispositions on the morning of March 21 shows five reserve divisions in the Ypres area, of which one, the 8th, was at St. Omer on its way down to the Fifth Army, four reserve divisions in the First Army area, six in the Third Army area, of which one, the 41st, was actually arriving at Albert, and three infantry and three cavalry divisions in the Fifth Army area. When comparing the rifle strength of a cavalry division with that of an infantry division the advantage given to the former by its superior mobility should not be overlooked.

had entered into the arrangement for mutual support discussed in detail in a previous chapter. Under the terms of this agreement, if the German stroke were directed against the British, our Allies were pledged either to intervene in the battle itself with a force of six to eight divisions with adequate artillery or to take over British line to a corresponding extent, so as to set free British divisions for the battle. Seeing that they had received clear and ample warning from the British of what was about to happen, it might reasonably have been expected that the French would have assembled an adequate force close to the British right prior to March 21, so as to be in a position to discharge this pledge.

What is the explanation of the absence of this promised aid and of the truly remarkable grouping of the French reserves ? It is believed that the motive was fear for Paris, and that the judgment of the French Commander-in-Chief was influenced both before and during the battle by insistent instructions that Paris was to be his principal care. If so, he was led by outside interference to make military dispositions that placed Paris in jeopardy. Whatever the explanation, the fact remains and is worth dwelling upon that, with precisely the same facts before them, the British General Staff formed a correct appreciation of the situation and of the enemy's intentions, while the French military authorities, in March 1918 as in August 1914, came to completely false conclusions on both heads.

When, therefore, at about 5.30 A.M. on March 21 what has been described—by those who have seen many—as the most stupendous bombardment of the war burst upon the British lines, there were within reach of the British right no French reserves except those allocated to the local needs of their own line. This was not all. Long before the end of the first day's fighting all doubt that this was indeed the enemy's supreme effort had been swept aside by definite evidence of the mighty forces he had thrown into the battle. It was no longer credible that while this battle raged any serious attempt could be made by him on any other front.

That was the British view: our Allies chose not to believe it. For two and a half days, with an obstinacy only comparable to Nivelle's refusal to recognise the Great Retreat when it was actually taking place before his eyes, his successors refused to admit the Great Attack though the thunder of it was dinning in their ears. They still turned nervous eyes to Reims with fearful backward glance towards Paris, and in March waited anxiously for an attack that took them completely by surprise in May.

The despatch had a difficult course to steer in dealing with this aspect of the battle. Truth and a wise regard for French susceptibilities were hopelessly in conflict. Referring to the pre-battle arrangements made with Pétain, the despatch assures us that measures had been taken to ensure their 'smooth and rapid execution.' This is true; but the inference that they were smoothly and rapidly executed is the reverse of the truth. The one thing essential to their smooth and rapid working, and the one thing that no paper arrangement could guarantee, was that the French should form an accurate view of the situation when the time came. In the event, they misjudged the situation completely, both before and after the commencement of the battle. So it is that we read later in the despatch that 'as a result of a meeting held in the afternoon of March 23,' that is, when the battle had been raging on a fifty-five mile front for two and a half days, 'arrangements were made for the French to take over as rapidly as possible the front held by the Fifth Army south of Péronne, *and for the concentration of a strong force of French divisions on the southern portion of the battle front.*' [1] If the pre-battle arrangements had indeed been put into

[1] *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches*, pp. 180 and 198. (Dent.) The italics are mine.

There is a passage on page 218 of the *Despatches* which also merits comment. Dealing with the reasons for the retirement of the British right, the despatch refers to the extensive German preparations for an offensive on the Reims front, and continues 'it could not be determined with certainty that this was a feint until the attack upon the British had been in progress for some days.' Here courtesy to our Allies is carried almost to excess, for this is put forward as though it was the British view of the situation at Reims, and it most certainly was not.

smooth and rapid working, this strong force of French divisions would have been concentrated in reach of the British right before March 21. When at last our Allies could no longer shut their eyes to facts, they sought the divisions necessary for effective intervention not from among the reserves nearest at hand, but from the extreme right of the French line. It was then rather late. The Germans reached the French detraining stations before the French reserves. When General Humbert arrived at Fifth Army Headquarters to support the British line and eventually to take it over, he was fain to confess in answer to General Gough's welcoming question that the only support he brought with him was the small general's flag that flew on the bonnet of his car.

The break-down of the arrangements for French co-operation would not have been cured by the appointment of a generalissimo at the beginning of March. A more likely result of such an appointment would have been the unwilling presence of British divisions in reserve behind Reims ! It was not even cured by the appointment of a French generalissimo at the end of March, for before Foch had had time to make his influence felt on the battle, the effects of the break-down *had already* been cured by the brilliant generalship and fighting qualities of the British Army.

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Controversy concerning the respective merits and achievements of the Fifth and Third British Armies has led some people to discuss the fighting on the respective fronts of these two armies as separate battles.[1] This is a mistake, for the battle was all one and was fought as a single conception both by the attack and the defence. The local strategy of the opening assault included violent converging assaults with great masses of troops on broad fronts south

[1] And to attach an exaggerated and mistaken importance to the location of army boundaries in back areas, fixed before the battle largely in accordance with administrative needs and necessarily controlled once the battle had started by the exigencies of the local military situation.

and north of the Flesquières salient with a highly concentrated yet subsidiary assault in the neighbourhood of La Fère. Treating the sectors extending from the Oise at Moy to the left boundary of the Fifth Army at Gouzeaucourt as the centre of an offensive with two ill-balanced wings, on this front of nearly 50,000 yards (about 28 miles) were assembled some 34 German divisions, the actual area of greatest concentration being opposite the XVIIIth and XIXth British Corps, where on a front of about 28,000 yards from south of St. Quentin to Hargicourt at the head of the Cologne valley were gathered some 22 German divisions. The immediate object of this truly terrific concentration of force would seem to have been the securing of the Somme crossings from Ham to Péronne. The subsidiary stroke on the left from La Fère would assist this movement in the first place by endangering the British troops south of the central thrust. It would play an even more important rôle later by turning the river and canal line and by giving space to the left shoulder of the attack when the advance was resumed west of the Somme. The line of the Oise river would form a natural and convenient flank to the attack on this side.

The effort of the right wing north of the Flesquières salient was on a different footing. Here, on a front of 16,000 yards (about 9½ miles) from the Bapaume–Cambrai road to the Sensée river were massed in line and reserve eighteen or nineteen German divisions, the highest concentration of the battle, and probably of the whole war. On the success of this unparalleled assault principally depended the attainment of the ultimate strategic objectives of the offensive. Its immediate or local strategic object—if the term may be employed—was a south-westwards thrust to Bapaume, converging upon the direction of the central advance and cutting off the retreat of the British divisions in the Flesquières salient. A united battle line would then push forwards on both banks of the Somme to Albert and Amiens. Arras would thus become the northern shoulder of the defence and, in order that the offensive might not

die out as previous offensives had done from a gradual restriction of the area of advance, it would become necessary to break down this northern shoulder. For this purpose, as soon as the opening strokes had attained their expected success and the preliminary objectives of the offensive had been gained, the battle front would be extended to the north by a powerful assault astride the Scarpe, designed to carry Arras and turn and capture the Vimy Ridge bastion. This would give the enemy in the northern sector of the battle a long front of attack with no great width of devastated country behind it to embarrass his communications. The left flank of the advance would become temporarily a defensive one—though the threat to Paris would be maintained—and the main attack would be pushed north-westwards between Amiens and Lens, rolling up the shattered British Army, against which the whole German line to the north would now be set in motion, severing it from the French and driving it back upon the narrow circle of defences covering the Channel ports.

Such is believed to have been the greater strategy of the March offensive, in which the Lys attack and the Ypres preparations had their place from the commencement, though their rôle in the original conception differed essentially from that ultimately forced upon the enemy in April. As first conceived, the Lys attack was to have been part of the rolling-up process following upon the success of the Arras–Vimy attack. An offensive against the French, whether at Reims or elsewhere, formed no part of the original plan; though once the defeated British Army had sought shelter behind the Abbeville–Boulogne–Calais lines and had been masked there by a suitable containing force, Ludendorff no doubt would have given the French all the attention they could desire.

There was a moment when it seemed that Ludendorff's grand design was on the point of success, for—as will be told later—the French command had decided and had actually commenced to draw the French troops in the old Fifth Army area back south-westwards to cover Paris,

severing connection with the British and leaving them to fend for themselves. The disaster that would inevitably have followed was prevented by two events of different character, but of supreme importance : first, by Sir Douglas Haig's action in summoning the Allied conference at Doullens at which, at the cost of subordinating himself to the one French general who was prepared to do as he asked, he brought our Allies to accept and act upon his conviction that at all costs Amiens must be covered and the connection between the Allied Armies maintained; second, by the utter defeat of the German attack upon Arras, a stroke which Sir Douglas Haig had long foreseen and had provided against—should the attack at first make headway—by maintaining the Canadian Corps in readiness to counter-attack.

Thus the strategic importance of maintaining the British line north of the Somme is obvious and the British Commander-in-Chief's action in allotting proportionately greater strength in line and reserve to the Third Army is explained and justified. Long before the battle opened the opinion had been formed that the blow north of the Flesquières salient would be the heavier. This was a matter of some nicety of judgment, but the opinion proved correct, inasmuch as the German concentration on the northern front gave one German division to about 900 yards, as against a *maximum* of one division to about 1300 yards on the more extended southern front. There was much nicety of judgment, too, in the British allocation of troops ; for the margin by which the Third Army held together was of the narrowest, and this despite the fact that they could be and were more rapidly reinforced by divisions brought from other fronts. It will be seen that the crisis of the battle came more rapidly on the Third Army front and was over sooner, a result that followed naturally from the greater violence of the opening stroke there and from the fact that the British there had less depth of ground over which they could retreat without jeopardising the security of their whole line. Had it been decided to give another two or

three divisions to the Fifth Army at the expense of the Third, it is almost inconceivable that the Third Army front would not have been broken, and in that event the position of the Fifth Army—even though stronger by three divisions—would have been impossible.

What has been written above does not detract from but on the contrary emphasises the glory of the achievement of the Fifth Army and its commander. Grievously outnumbered, with no expectation of substantial reinforcement from the British and deprived of the aid they had a right to expect from the French, far weaker at the start than the Third Army, they did as a fact maintain an organised and ultimately successful defence against some 40 German divisions, as compared with 24 divisions involved on the original front of attack against the Third Army. The only point in their favour was that they had greater depth behind their front over which they could safely fight a retreating battle. No useful purpose is served, however, by seeking to contrast the performances of either Army to the greater merit or demerit of the other. From La Fère to beyond Oppy the battle was one battle, directed according to one great strategic plan in the attack, and conducted in the defence solely with a view to meeting and confounding that plan. If further attention is drawn later in this chapter to the narrowness of the margin by which first the Third Army and then the Fifth Army escaped decisive defeat, the sole object of so doing is to emphasise the admirable judgment and foresight that went to determine the disposition of the British forces available for defence.

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The first news from the battle on March 21 did not give any immediate cause for alarm. As the morning wore on, it became evident that our posts in the forward zone had been captured, driven in or surrounded on practically the whole front of attack; but this was a possibility that had been discounted by the preparations we had made. At midday the battle zone as a whole did not seem to be gravely endangered, though there was trouble of a local

character on the extreme right opposite La Fère and more serious trouble at Maissemy and Ronssoy. No definite information had been received, moreover, from the 14th Division south of St. Quentin. The progress made by the enemy opposite La Fère, where the northern brigade of the 58th Division was striving to hold in check the efforts of three German divisions to force a passage across the Oise and Crozat Canals along the line of the main road and railway, and the report that the enemy was shelling heavily the village of Viry Noreuil west of the latter crossing, determined the IIIrd Corps Commander, General Butler, to send a request to the French that a French cavalry regiment might be brought up to meet eventualities on that flank. The front of attack, however, was too narrow for an isolated advance here to cause serious alarm apart from developments elsewhere.

The news ultimately received from the 14th Division, at 1 P.M., put a different complexion upon affairs. The enemy was then reported to be north and west of Essigny and shortly afterwards to be between Essigny and Benay. The 18th Division believed both villages lost, and it became clear that in this sector the enemy was already practically through our battle zone. What exactly happened to the 14th Division on this day it is difficult to say. Fighting on a front of 5500 yards, with all three brigades in line, they were on the extreme left of the German central attack and would seem to have had from two to two and a half German divisions in line against them with another division in close reserve. The odds were less than they were on the fronts of the XVIIIth and XIXth Corps. Somewhere or other, there would appear to have been a temporary break-down ; for the division had a hard-fighting record, though rather an unlucky one, and the remnants of the division fought stubbornly and well in the succeeding days of the battle.

At Maissemy, which was near the centre of the thrust on the Fifth Army front, the enemy entered our battle zone positions at about noon, but both the 61st and the 24th Divisions were doing well and, aided by comparatively

small reinforcements supplied by the 1st Cavalry Division, were able to hold the attack for this day at least. At Ronssoy the outlook was from the first more grave, and the rapidity of the enemy's advance into the Cologne valley came as an unpleasant surprise. There is no doubt that portions of the 16th Division holding this sector did their duty gallantly and well. Reports that came in later from officers of the division who were taken prisoners show that this is so. If individual units did well, there is equally no room for doubt, if any credence is to be given either to the reports then current or to the facts as they appear on the map and in the operation reports, that the division as a whole failed to act up to the reputation it had established for itself in earlier battles. Holding a sector of some 6000 yards, it was on the right of the main thrust on the Fifth Army front and would seem to have had three German divisions opposed to it, as compared with twelve divisions on the combined fronts of the 24th and 61st Divisions. It will be noticed that the divisional frontages of both the 14th and 16th Divisions were below the average for the Fifth Army.

At this date the 16th Division did not consist entirely of Southern Irishmen, as drafts from Southern Ireland were not forthcoming in sufficient numbers to keep up even its reduced establishment of ten battalions. There was, of course, a large Irish element, and this element did not prove on this day a source of strength. The loss of Ronssoy enabled the enemy to work round southwards in rear of the 66th Division in Hargicourt and Villeret, and to the north to attack the 21st Division in Epéhy in flank. Epéhy held, and provided one of the most gallant episodes of the first two days' fighting; but Hargicourt and Villeret were practically surrounded, and were entered by the enemy about midday, though fighting would seem to have continued in the Hargicourt quarries for some time later. Here too a serious breach had been made in our battle zone, and a brigade of the 39th Division, our only reserve division on this front, was involved in the effort to repair it. Later in the afternoon the rest of this division was also drawn in,

being moved to a position in support between Tincourt and Saulcourt. A long defensive flank was already forming to the north of the point of weakness, adding dangerously to the depth of the salient held by us at Flesquières.

The battle on the Third Army front followed the course that might be expected from the highly concentrated nature of the assault there. Our forward zone was overrun rapidly on the whole front and a desperate fight began early in the day for the possession of the battle zone positions. By midday serious encroachments had been made upon these by the capture of Noreuil, Longatte, and Ecoust St. Mein. Such was the weight and momentum of the German thrust that, despite the greater density of our troops in line on this Army front and the closer proximity and greater strength of our reserves, before the fighting died down for the night the enemy had effected further inroads by the capture of Doignies and Lagnicourt. At one time it was reported that the sector of the battle zone opposite Mory had been completely breached, but here our troops succeeded in restoring the situation for the time.

On the Fifth Army front the situation at the close of the day, except in the sectors of the 14th and 16th Divisions and in a less important degree at Fargnier,[1] was not dissimilar. The enemy was still firmly held in the battle zone ; indeed in more than one sector he had failed to encroach upon it, or even to complete the reduction of certain posts in our forward zone. In the 14th Division sector he was well to the west of Benay and Essigny, and had here made his deepest progress. At the head of the Cologne valley he had pushed beyond Templeux-le-Guérard. These were matters of great moment ; but the point which it is desired to emphasise, in order that the battle as a whole may be presented in proper perspective, is that by the time all

[1] At Fargnier our three zones lay very close together, being governed by the course of the Oise and Crozat Canals which join there. The enemy reached Fargnier on March 21, but had still got the Crozat Canal in front of him, and, as already stated in the text, the situation here was serious more by reason of the enemy's progress elsewhere than for any intrinsic cause.

adjustments of the Third Army line had been made the depth and seriousness of the enemy's gains on the front of the last-mentioned army are fairly comparable with any of his gains on the Fifth Army front, with the exception of the two sectors to which special reference has been made.[1] The margins by which certain portions of our battle zone on the Fifth and Third Army fronts respectively were in the one case broken and in the other held by our troops were equally narrow. Looking to the probable outcome of the battle as a whole and having regard to the relative importance of the two fronts and of the ground immediately behind them, there was little to choose between them in the matter of anxiety for the future.

Had there been no more than another two British divisions in France on March 21, their presence in close reserve on the Fifth Army front might well have enabled us to restore the situation in the Essigny–Benay and Cologne sectors. Such action would have had an immense effect on the whole course of the battle. It would then have become unnecessary for the IIIrd Corps to carry out, on the night of March 21, the withdrawal behind the Crozat Canal, a line which was itself not well adapted for defence owing to the bend in the canal which left the right of the XVIIIth Corps dangerously exposed. In the Cologne valley similarly the long flank facing south and south-east, which absorbed the 39th Division and overstretched the 21st and 9th Divisions, would have been avoided altogether, with all the consequent ills which led ultimately to a series of most dangerous breaks in the continuity of our line on the flanks of the two armies. The second day's fighting would have opened with an intact battle line and with the bulk of three infantry divisions, the 20th, 50th, and 39th and of the three cavalry divisions still intact behind it—not to mention the 8th Division then on its way south.

It is not suggested that the presence of another two divisions would have enabled the Fifth Army to hold its

[1] This can be seen by consulting the map of the battle accompanying Dent's edition of Haig's *Despatches*.

ground indefinitely in the conditions of fog in which the battle was still fought, in the face of such tremendous odds. The centre divisions of the Fifth Army, which maintained so magnificent a defence against the greatest weight of the attack until the afternoon of the 22nd, must ultimately have given way unless they too had been reinforced. A further two divisions together with those actually available might have been enough for this ; another four, that is to say a total of six additional divisions in France, would in all human probability have sufficed. When the British centre gave, the enemy was well behind its line on either flank. Had it been possible to stop the two breaks on the flanks with adequate reserves on the 21st, so that the second day's battle could have opened with our battle zone substantially intact, and had the Fifth Army still possessed reserves to draw from for the reinforcement of the battle zone, the fighting of the 22nd would have been conducted under very different conditions and must have had very different results. On the other hand, the absence of even two divisions on the Third Army front would almost certainly have led to an early break-through there which would have spelt destruction for the Fifth Army and disaster to the Allied forces.

At the conclusion of this great battle, 46 British divisions had been involved and had incurred grave losses. When at the end of April the storm passed away from the British front, 8 divisions were destined for months to come to be of no further use as fighting units. Another 6 British divisions in France on March 20, the infantry equivalent, that is, of less than one-half of the battalions lost in the reorganisation of our forces during the winter, would have saved all this. It took many times the strength of 6 divisions to repair our losses.

The alarming progress made by the enemy on the front of the 14th Division left General Butler no choice but to withdraw his Corps during the night of the 21st-22nd behind the protection of the Crozat Canal. This move, as already indicated, compelled the withdrawal of the right of the

XVIIIth Corps also, and even so left General Maxse with a stretched and weakened flank. The continued weakness of our line in the Cologne valley reacted unfavourably upon the position both south and north of this sector, but principally to the north, where the 21st Division was speedily involved in difficulties owing to the turning of their right flank, and the 9th Division, in its effort to maintain touch both with the 21st Division and the right of the Third Army, found itself responsible for a steadily increasing length of front. Some 4000 yards on the morning of March 21, by the morning of the 22nd it had grown to 6000 yards, by the evening of that day to 8000 and by the morning of the 23rd to over 11,000 yards. Though the 99th Brigade had by then been placed under its orders, it was impossible for the Division, already much reduced in numbers, to maintain a continuous line over so great a length of front. The enemy made the most of his opportunities here, pressing north-westwards as well as westwards both on the 22nd and 23rd, rendering the extrication of our troops in the Flesquières salient most difficult. This constant pressure westwards and north-westwards from the Cologne valley break, combined with the lagging behind of the extreme left of the Fifth Army in a very praiseworthy effort to keep touch with the advanced right of the Third Army, steadily increased the area of ground that our weakened divisions had to cover and resulted on the third day in the formation of gaps between the several units of the VIIth and Vth Corps.

The withdrawal of our troops from the Flesquières salient began on the night of March 21-22 [1] in accordance with

[1] Critics have urged that the Flesquières salient ought to have been evacuated prior to the battle, and have stated that to crowd troops into this restricted and exposed area was merely to court loss. Such criticisms display an inadequate appreciation of the situation. The salient was held by three divisions covering a front of about 9 miles, *i.e.* it was held lightly apart from the fact that only a small proportion of these troops were in the forward zone. After our withdrawal in December 1917, the salient was a comparatively shallow one, but on the other hand the position was of great strength, and to have abandoned it prior to the battle would have been tantamount to a confession that we did not expect to be able to withstand the coming attack.

arrangements made in view of the possibility that the attacks to the south and north might compel us to give ground. The rate of the enemy's progress, however, on March 21 and 22 on the flanks of this salient was greater than the rate of our withdrawal within it, so that on the night of the 22nd the salient was both narrower and deeper than it had originally been. The enemy was pressing south from the line of the Bapaume–Cambrai road as well as north from the line of the Cologne river, and though the successful resistance of the 17th Division held the northern pincer in check during the critical period of the withdrawal, the tremendous drive against the centre of the Third Army could not be denied. The enemy steadily gained ground north of the salient as well as to the south of it, and the fact that the whole line was swinging back at the same time that the troops in the salient were withdrawing was ultimately to involve the IVth Corps in difficulties little less than those which had already overtaken the Vth and VIIth Corps. By the evening of March 23 the centre corps of the Third Army were fighting in their rear zones and the salient still persisted. Next night our line lay west of Bapaume, and the salient had become a dangerous re-entrant. The crisis of the battle on the northern front had been reached.

Meanwhile, to the south matters had moved quicker in some respects, yet in others—and those the essential—more slowly. A greater area of country had been lost, but the most critical stage of the battle was still some days distant. True, the first great decision had been taken by General Gough on the evening of the 22nd, after the gallant resistance of the centre divisions of his army had at length been forced to give ground. This was the decision to withdraw at once behind the line of the river Somme. If there is any point in General Gough's skilful and courageous conduct of this epic rear-guard action which is open to criticism, it is the time at which this decision was taken. If it could safely have been postponed even for a few hours, not only would the rate of the enemy's advance have been delayed to that extent, but there would unquestionably have been a very

considerable saving of valuable fighting material. The troops that had already crossed the Somme and were now being reinforced by the 8th Division would have had so much longer to put the river line in a state of defence before the leading German detachments began to descend the slopes on the eastern bank. It would have been a great gain to the defence ; would it have been safe ?

The question is a very difficult one ; neither is it wholly possible, when the problem is reconsidered years later with the aid of reports written when the stress of battle was over, to visualise and appreciate correctly the conditions under which the decision was given. There are two considerations, however, which perhaps point to the conclusion that the decision to withdraw across the river was arrived at sooner than was absolutely necessary. First, General Gough was misinformed on a material point with regard to the situation on the IIIrd Corps front, and was undoubtedly influenced in his judgment thereby. He was under the impression that the enemy had forced the passage of the Crozat Canal at Jussy in the evening of March 22. Had this been true, it would clearly have been taking a great and unjustifiable risk to postpone the withdrawal of the divisions east of the Somme an instant longer than could be helped ; for it would have meant that the river line had already been turned and further progress by the enemy at this point would have been a most dangerous threat to the safety of all troops still east of the river. The fact was that the crossings at Jussy had been lost but regained, and were intact on the night of the 22nd. There was no further attack here till the morning of March 23, and the crossings were not finally lost and the passage made effective to the enemy until about 11 A.M. on that day.[1]

[1] The report of the 18th Division states that at 6 P.M. on the 22nd the enemy opened a very heavy bombardment of the 54th Brigade front, followed by a strong assault on the Jussy and Montagne bridges, which forced crossings at both points. At 7 P.M. counter-attacks by the Northamptons and Bedfords drove the enemy back across the Montagne bridge, whilst the reserve squadron of the 15th Lancers restored the situation at Jussy. No further attempts were made by the enemy to cross the canal

The other point relates to the situation on the 50th Division front. The division was moved forward on March 21 to man the rear zone of defence between Villéveque and Boucly, the total length occupied by the division being about 10,500 yards. The line was wired, but dug to a depth of from one to two feet only. By 8 A.M. on March 22 troops were in position, their duty being to form a reserve line through which the divisions originally engaged could retire, and to hold that line sufficiently long to give those divisions a chance to pull themselves together a little. The 50th Division were not themselves attacked until 5.30 P.M. that evening, though they had been under shell-fire previously. About that hour, according to the report of the division, attacks developed in two localities, in each case in considerable strength, the one near Nobescourt Farm and the other on the extreme right. Both attacks made some progress without actually breaking our line, though the right of the 50th Division found itself out of touch with the British troops to the south. The general position had been held, and though an hour of twilight remained, no further attacks were made. Large bodies of the enemy were digging in, however, close to our wire, and the Divisional Commander, Brigadier-General Stockley, deemed it wise to disengage from the line he had originally taken up and re-form farther west. Ultimately his opinion was accepted, and orders were issued to the division to occupy a line from Monchy–Lagache to Vraignes and Brusle, the 24th Division prolonging the line to the south. It was while this order was being carried out that telephone instructions were received from the XIXth Corps that the division was to withdraw as rapidly as possible behind the Somme. The troops accordingly continued their movement, to the accompaniment of an attack which at 6.30 A.M. the enemy delivered in the mist upon the unoccupied Villéveque–Boucly positions. At Vraignes indeed the 4th East Yorks became engaged with the enemy

on the 54th Brigade front until the morning of the 23rd. It will be remembered that the French were responsible for the destruction of these bridges.

at 8 A.M., when the order to retire reached them, and withdrew from the village with some difficulty.

The effect of the early decision to withdraw behind the Somme therefore was that the 50th Division, to whom had been assigned the duty on this front of delaying the enemy as long as possible in the interest of the troops whose reorganisation it was intended to cover, withdrew from the Monchy–Lagache–Brusle line not only before the position was seriously attacked, but before the enemy had arrived in front of any part of it except the point of the salient at Vraignes. By 11.30 A.M. the division had reached a temporary line extending from Athies to Le Mesnil, and it was not until the final retirement across the river was being carried out that the enemy made any attempt to attack this position. He then endeavoured, without success, to envelop the rear-guards of the last brigade to cross. By 3.15 P.M. on the 23rd the whole division was east of the river, having done excellent work—the prelude of splendid work to come—but having fought as a covering division only the three local engagements referred to. This being the experience of the one covering division, it is certainly arguable that the retirement across the Somme was unduly rapid, and that a different handling of the situation might have kept the enemy away from the river approaches until nightfall without endangering the safety of our troops. In that event, several precious hours would have been gained in which the defences west of the river might have been farther advanced, the 8th Division given longer to establish themselves, and more thorough preparations made for the complete demolition of the bridges. It might even have become unnecessary to burn out so many of our tanks on the east bank of the river. One thing further would have resulted, perhaps the most important of all. The withdrawal of the VIIth Corps would have been made much easier, and a great deal of over-stretching, lack of touch and consequent disorganisation might have been avoided.

During the night of March 22-23 the VIIth Corps had withdrawn to its rear zone defences, and by daybreak was

fairly comfortably established there in touch with the Vth Corps, which was continuing its withdrawal from the Cambrai salient, but was still well in front of the rest of our line. The report received at 8.15 P.M. on the previous night, that the enemy had broken through the rear zone on the XIXth and XVIIIth Corps fronts, had been accompanied by orders from the Fifth Army that the VIIth Corps was to get onto the line Doingt–Nurlu, but these orders were cancelled an hour later. In the early morning, however, came the news that the XIXth Corps was falling back across the Somme, and the VIIth Corps was directed to fight a rear-guard action back to the Doingt–Nurlu line. This rapid swinging back of the right of the VIIth Corps again extended the line to be held, and made the task of the 9th Division, which was endeavouring to keep touch with the advanced right of the Third Army, utterly impossible. There is nothing so demoralising to troops as a constant series of withdrawals from positions which they feel they could still hold. The defence of the right and centre of the VIIth Corps (16th, 39th and 21st Divisions) weakened. Between 2 and 4 P.M. the enemy captured Péronne, and at the latter hour was advancing westwards from Mont St. Quentin. At the end of the day the 16th Division and two brigades of the 39th were behind the Somme from La Chapellette to Omiécourt, while the rest of the 39th, the 21st, and the 9th held a line from Cléry northwards to Government Farm, between Vaux Wood and St. Pierre Vaast Wood. It had proved impossible to hold and control the rearward movement started by the order to withdraw. In the course of the one day the Corps had fallen back for a distance of between six and seven miles, cohesion between units was uncertain, and the flank divisions (9th and 47th) of the two armies had definitely lost touch. The Vth Corps had been compelled to execute an equally hurried retreat over a distance but little less than this, and by nightfall was beginning to experience the same disorganisation.

Before dealing with the further results that followed from

the abandonment of the Péronne bridgehead, the course of the battle on the southern portion of the Fifth Army front must be brought up to date ; for the centre of that army holding the Somme line was shortly to find itself in a position similar to that of March 22, that is to say, at the head of a broad salient, with the enemy deeply beyond its flanks to south and north.

We have seen that it was not until the morning of the 23rd that the enemy had succeeded in turning to effective use the bridges at Jussy and its neighbourhood ; but already on the afternoon of the 22nd the powerful localised thrust along the La Fère–Tergnier road had forced the crossings of the canal at the latter place, and though held in Tergnier until the late evening by the determined resistance of two companies of the 8th London Regiment assisted by some machine-gun units, the enemy had ultimately established an effective bridgehead there on the west bank of the canal. As the result of our inability to send reserves, which were more urgently needed elsewhere, to deal with this comparatively minor inroad in its early stages, it was fast developing a more threatening aspect. The same night, however, news was received locally that the 58th Division had passed under command of the Sixth French Army, and that the 125th French Division was moving up to counter-attack and regain the line of the canal. That evening General Pellé, commanding the Vth French Corps, had arrived at General Butler's headquarters, and had promised also to relieve the 18th and 14th Divisions with the 1st French Dismounted Cavalry Division and the 9th French Division on the night of the 23rd-24th.

The 125th French Division was therefore the first French unit to come to our assistance, and at 6 A.M. on the 23rd it attacked on the extreme right of the battle front, assisted on its left by two companies of the Queen's. The attack did not progress farther than the western outskirts of Tergnier, a distance, that is, of a few hundred yards, and later in the morning the French infantry retired through the British troops that were holding the Vouel line. They

said they were very short of ammunition. The enemy was not slow to take advantage of the situation created by the failure of the French counter-attack, and, having by this time established himself west of the canal at Mennessis and Jussy, began to press forward along the whole line of the IIIrd Corps.

Meanwhile, the withdrawal of the XVIIIth Corps from its battle zone opposite St. Quentin to its new positions on the west bank of the Somme, commenced under orders late in the afternoon of March 22 and continued throughout the following night, had been accompanied by a considerable extension of its front, from 16,000 yards at the commencement of the battle to 22,000 yards along the river. To cover the retreat over this rapidly increasing front only two brigades of the 20th Division were available. It is not a matter for surprise, therefore, that a gap should have formed in the course of this night withdrawal, and through this gap the enemy reached the defences of Ham in the early morning of the 23rd. The defence of these positions had been allotted to the 89th Infantry Brigade, 30th Division, and certain details ; but owing to some mistake the troops of the 89th Brigade withdrew behind these defences instead of occupying them, and so uncovered Ham at a critical moment. The other troops held on till about 5.30 A.M., when they were forced to retire by the turning of their flanks. Some two hours later the enemy effected a crossing, being aided by the fact that the railway bridge at Pithon had been left intact. This was one of the bridges which the French authorities, at their own request, had undertaken to destroy. Apparently it had not been prepared for demolition, and the efforts of some French railway details to destroy the bridge at the last moment without proper explosives were naturally ineffective.

By 10.35 A.M. the Germans had crossed in the Ham sector in strength, and commenced to press back our troops, until checked in the afternoon by a counter-attack delivered with great dash by the 60th Brigade and elements of the 182nd Brigade (20th and 61st Divisions), which got within 500

yards of the west end of Ham Bridge. This stopped the enemy's progress in this sector for the day, but the net result of the fighting on the right wing was that by nightfall on the 23rd the enemy was well across the river barrier at all points from Ham inclusive southwards. The position held by the centre of the Fifth Army along the Somme was therefore in process of being turned simultaneously from the south and from the north. The arrival of French troops and the placing of the IIIrd Corps under command of the Third French Army (General Humbert), which took place at 6.30 P.M. on this day, did little to relieve the situation. The French certainly strained every nerve to hurry their troops forward when once they had decided to send them ; but no haste could make up the time lost by their earlier hesitation and by their continued reluctance to draw upon the group of reserves nearest the battle. They were starting too late, and the speed with which the French divisions were now being urged up was at the expense of their usefulness when they did get to the fighting line. Even so, they were almost invariably behind the promised time of their arrival. Further, they came for the most part without their artillery, and short of everything necessary to enable them to give a good account of themselves in the fight. It is not surprising that during these early days of their intervention they failed to do so.

At 1 P.M., a regiment of the 1st French Dismounted Cavalry Division reached Ugny, and by the evening the division had taken over the line from Noreuil to beyond Villequier-Aumont in relief of the 18th British Division. So that at the end of the third day of the battle French assistance consisted of one infantry division and one cavalry division, equipped with some 30 or 50 rounds of ammunition per man. The relief of the 14th Division by the 9th French Division had been promised, but the relief appears to have got no further on this day than the deployment of two French battalions in rear of the 14th Division line. At the same time that the 9th French Division was on its way to the support of the 14th Division, three other French divisions

were reported to be coming up from Noyon to support the XVIIIth Corps, namely, the 10th, 62nd and 22nd. Of these, the 10th and 22nd were to be in position with the British by the evening of March 23, while the 62nd was to be in position on the morning of the 24th. None of these French divisions got into position before the afternoon of March 24, and the 22nd and 62nd were then without artillery. The infantry, especially those of the 22nd Division, are described as being of inferior quality, and they carried only 50 rounds of ammunition per man.

The relief of the 18th British Division by the French dismounted cavalry was of short duration. At 9 A.M. on the 24th the French line was falling back rapidly, and an hour later the 18th Division was ordered to take up a defensive position covering Caillouel and Beaugies, where they again came in contact with the enemy during the afternoon. This meant that the French troops had already been driven back a distance of some four miles behind the line they had taken over from us, and at 9.30 P.M. that night they were still withdrawing westwards, uncovering the left of the 18th Division at Beaugies. On the XVIIIth Corps front matters were little better. After a gallant stand on the line of the Somme during the morning, in the course of which the 20th Division twice drove back across the river by counter-attack German troops that had succeeded in gaining the western bank, we had been compelled to fall back from the river to the line of the Libermont Canal, and a gap commenced to form between the left of the XVIIIth Corps and the right of the XIXth. In this situation four companies of the 22nd French Division reinforced the right of the 20th British Division, and in virtue of this assistance the French divisional commander assumed command of the 20th British Division in addition to his own. No French troops could be spared, however, to fill the gap to the north, and though there appear to have been French battalions in this area, they had no definite orders or any information as to the rôle they were expected to play. The position was a serious one, for while the bulk of the XIXth Corps was

still established on the line of the Somme north of Epénancourt, there was already a danger that the French and British forces on the right of them would be forced away in a south-westerly direction.

In this situation, in the late evening of March 24 General Gough visited XVIIIth Corps headquarters at Roye, and spoke on the telephone to General Robillot, commanding the corps to which the French troops on this front belonged. As a temporary measure it was arranged that four French companies should be despatched to retake Mesnil St. Nicaise ; but before the French arrived the commander of the 183rd Brigade attacked and recaptured the village with such British troops as he could collect, regaining touch with the 8th Division and closing the gap for the time being. It was further arranged that on the morning of the 25th a combined French and British counter-attack should be made on the Germans north-east of Nesle, with the object of driving them back over the Somme and restoring the river line in this sector. The 24th British Division was to be brought forward from reserve to assist the troops in line, and the 8th Division (XIXth Corps) was to join in also. The attack was timed to start at 8 A.M., and a barrage table was arranged accordingly.

At daybreak the French were not in position and asked for a postponement for three hours. This was agreed to, but at the end of that time the French were still not in position, and it was then ascertained that no definite orders had been issued by our Allies, who declared that they regarded the whole scheme as a ' projet ' only. No attack took place.

The incident is typical of the fighting on the southern portion of the Fifth Army front at this time. With the best will in the world, the French troops when they first arrived could not be made fully effective. French commanders obviously could not be as completely in touch with the situation as the British, yet as the price of French intervention they took command of British troops and superseded British generals. On the morning of March 25

General Fayolle assumed responsibility for the whole of the Fifth Army front as far north as the Somme ; yet at this time and for two days after this date the bulk of the fighting was done by British troops. At no time were the French able to make good the full responsibility they had assumed.

The first duty of the French was to take over the IIIrd Corps front, and send the troops of the IIIrd Corps north to reinforce the rest of the Fifth Army. This was but carrying out the scheme arranged before the battle, and the Fifth Army depended upon it ; for both the needs of the northern front and the difficulties in the way of transferring British divisions from the north of our line to the extreme right south of the Somme made it practically impossible to reinforce the centre corps of the Fifth Army with British troops from the north. Yet, despite urgent requests from the British, the withdrawal of the IIIrd Corps divisions did not commence till the evening of March 26, and it was not until the last day of the month and the closing stages of the battle that the first of the IIIrd Corps divisions returned to the British Army.[1] Certainly the relief of British troops generally was complicated by the fact that on more than one occasion the French troops sent up to take over the line got up and retired too, as soon as the British troops they were intended to relieve commenced to move back. In fact, the situation on the IIIrd Corps front could not have been maintained had it not been for the presence and the efforts of the British mounted troops who acted as a screen to French and British infantry alike. They did work which no other arm of the service in such scanty numerical strength could have done. If British cavalry had seen no other service in the whole war, they would have been justified by their action in this battle.

The difficulties of the Allied defence, however, were not confined to the continual shortage of troops. The proper combination of operations was complicated and confused not only by a natural ignorance of the battle situation on

[1] The withdrawal of the 58th Division from the line was not completed till the night of April 2-3.

the part of the newly arrived French commanders, but by the fact that the French staff failed to work through the proper channels and on recognised principles of command. Orders were issued direct to British units without reference to or even informing the British command concerned. These orders included the withdrawal of the 20th and 30th British Divisions south-westwards together with the 22nd and 62nd French Divisions, under whose orders respectively they had been placed, orders which, had they been implicitly obeyed by the British divisions concerned, would have resulted in the formation of a ten-mile gap between the French at Montdidier and the British at Beaucourt. Fortunately, they were not obeyed. Both British divisions succeeded in disentangling themselves from the French, though their artillery remained with the French divisions. With the 61st Division and later the 36th, which though nominally also under the 62nd French Division received no orders from it, the 20th and 30th British Divisions continued to look to the XVIIIth Corps for instructions, and both on March 25 and 26 succeeded in spite of French orders in maintaining connection between the British and French Armies.

It has been said above that the most critical stages of the battle arrived earlier on the northern front than on the southern. This statement has reference to the actual course of the fighting, and from this point of view the climax of danger north of the Somme arrived on the 24th and 25th, and was over by the evening of the 26th, while south of the Somme it arrived on March 28 and was not entirely over till the end of the month. On the French front anxiety continued well into the first week of April. From a larger point of view, however, involving not the details of the fighting only but the whole strategy of the defence, the main crisis of the whole battle had already arrived when Pétain informed the British Commander-in-Chief at Dury on the night of March 24 that he had issued orders to the French divisions that, if the enemy continued to press his attacks in the direction of Amiens (as he in fact did), they were to fall back south-westwards to cover Paris.

This meant the separation of the French and British Armies and their ultimate destruction in detail. It involved the decision not of one battle only, but of the war. It has already been seen how the newly-arrived French divisions on the XVIIIth Corps front were falling back south-westwards, dragging with them the British divisions placed under their orders, and how the infantry of the British divisions had managed to extricate themselves and maintain the continuity of the Allied line. This could not be continued indefinitely, however, for the British were too few, and unless a firm and confident hand took hold of the French Army and brought French reserves to the decisive spot, not in detail from the far end of France, but in an adequate force of divisions from close at hand, the battle would be lost. It was in these circumstances that Sir Douglas Haig wired to England for the Chief of the Imperial General Staff to come to France, in order that a Commander-in-Chief for the whole Western Front might be appointed, and at the same time wrote to M. Clémenceau and to General Foch pointing out that the enemy must succeed in his obvious intention of forcing the French and British Armies apart unless the French came to a definite decision at once to concentrate a force of at least twenty divisions astride the Somme west of Amiens.

On the 25th Lord Milner and Sir Henry Wilson arrived in France, and it was agreed at the British Commander-in-Chief's suggestion that the only method by which the French could be got to act and to act quickly would be to secure the appointment of Foch as supreme commander. The historic meeting at Doullens followed on the 26th, at which Sir Douglas Haig's view of the situation was adopted, and Foch accepted the position of Generalissimo with the declared intention of preserving at all costs the continuity of the Allied line.

The main crisis of the battle, and possibly of the war, was safely over. It is a curious coincidence that the day which saw the rise of this supreme crisis of the battle also saw the development of the most critical stage of the fighting north

of the Somme, and the day on which was taken the momentous decision which saved the Allied cause witnessed also the end of the chief danger period on the Third Army front. So uncertain had the local situation been considered, however, that during the conference at Doullens tanks were placed to cover the eastern approaches to the town. They were not needed, and after March 26 no material change took place in the line north of the Somme. There was, however, one other crisis of the major sort before the battle was over, not so important as that which terminated with the Doullens conference, but only second to it. If March 26 is the decisive date in the strategic development of the defence, March 28 was to be the decisive date in the development of the enemy's offensive. The utter defeat of the German attack astride the Scarpe on that day destroyed all prospect that the enemy would be able to carry out his original strategic conception. It is a further coincidence that this is also the date when the danger line south of the Somme reached its highest point.

It will be convenient to take these two periods of grave anxiety on the original battle front separately, each in its order of occurrence, and then turn briefly to the Arras attack.

It has been seen how the rapidity of the retreat of the VIIth Corps on March 23—a retreat which in its initial stages at any rate was due to definite orders to fall back in conformity with the movements to the south of them—had at the close of that day carried the Corps front approximately to the old Allied line at the end of 1916, and some two miles west of the line of the Fifth Army centre on the left bank of the Somme. The troops were dog-tired, there were many gaps, and everywhere touch was most difficult to maintain ; the disorganisation was spreading northwards, and had involved the Vth Corps. On March 24 the enemy renewed his attacks as soon as it was light, and by midday was pushing our troops back with alarming speed across the old Somme battlefield. Locality after locality, the names of which conjured up memories of many days and

weeks of desperate fighting and step-by-step advances in 1916, was overrun by the enemy in the course of a few brief hours. Judged only from the curt condensed reports that reached G.H.Q., strings of names and map references unrelieved for the most part by anything that might explain the bearing of the troops, it looked almost as though our men had definitely broken and were no longer fighting.

It was not the case. Tired as they were, sadly reduced in numbers and often out of touch, and without precise orders or information as to the general conduct of the battle, units were fighting not only stubbornly but hopefully. It is a curious fact which all G.H.Q. liaison officers commented upon during the first stages of the battle, that the nearer they got to the fighting the more cheerful was the view taken of the prospects of the battle. The men had confidence in their leaders and Higher Command. At the time when the Higher Command were most anxious as to whether reserves would arrive in time, and in particular as to whether our Allies could be got to take in time steps that would bring us adequate French assistance south of the river Somme, the fighting troops seem to have had a complete and perfect confidence that the reserves would be forthcoming. It was not till the later stages when, on the British front north of the Somme at any rate, the reserve problem had been solved, and G.H.Q. was beginning to breathe again, that the splendid courage and trust of the troops in line commenced here and there to falter and give way to doubt.

On March 24—which saw Bapaume once more German, the right of the Third Army being driven back no less a distance than eight miles, and our troops on the right bank of the Somme nearly five miles west of our troops on the south bank opposite Péronne—if there was any doubt anywhere it does not seem to have been in the hard-pressed fighting line. Behind the line at G.H.Q. the night of Sunday March 24 was one of heart-searching anxiety, and the writer, whose duties gave him knowledge without responsibility so far as the course of the battle was concerned, was filled with lasting admiration at the way in which those who were

sharing in greater or less degree in the conduct of the mighty struggle, upon whose judgment, decision, accuracy, and care so much depended, went quietly and steadfastly about their business. He has seen infinitely more apparent emotion at the counting of a bye-election.

Early in the night of March 24 the first troops of the 35th Division came into action in support of the VIIth Corps north of the river. Their arrival had a marked effect, while earlier in the day the 1st Cavalry Division, brought up hurriedly from the south of the Somme, had intervened on the left of the VIIth Corps front, where the Corps flank was in the air. The advent of fresh troops of the 35th Division had a very steadying result. The general line Curlu–Hardecourt held on the evening of the 24th was maintained practically unchanged throughout the following day—indeed until our troops were withdrawn under orders, and the point of danger moved north, where the disorganisation of our line on the Vth Corps front had involved the IVth Corps in difficulties also.

The IVth Corps had been forced out of Mory early on the morning of the 24th, and throughout that day had been fighting hard on the line of the Bapaume–Ervillers road. It maintained this line during the morning of the 25th in touch with the VIth Corps to the north, where our line was holding firmly ; but the Vth Corps had been unable to stabilise its front. By the middle of the afternoon three distinct gaps had formed, one between the VIIth and Vth Corps, one in the line of the Vth Corps itself, and the third between the Vth Corps and the IVth Corps, whose right was now bent back sharply westwards from Sapignies to Bihucourt, striving to regain touch. The left of the VIIth Corps was similarly bent back at right angles westwards from Trônes Wood to Mametz. The danger was acute, and was accentuated when later in the evening the right of the IVth Corps began to be pressed back north-westwards, while its left temporarily lost touch with the VIth Corps.

As regards reserves, however, the situation was fast changing for the better. On the morning of the 25th, as already

stated, the French had assumed direct responsibility for the front south of the Somme. Though the advantage of this arrangement was not at first very apparent from the point of view of the British troops engaged there, and though the control assumed was destined never to become wholly effective, it left the British free to devote their principal energies to the paramount task of assuring the security of the northern front. The major portion of the Fifth Army being now directly under General Fayolle, the VIIth Corps north of the Somme was transferred to the Third Army, a change which simplified the task of co-ordinating the defence of the northern front and relieved the Fifth Army to that extent.[1] Behind the enlarged front for which the Third Army was now responsible were assembling at Doullens the 3rd, 4th and 5th Australian Divisions. The 12th Division on the afternoon of March 25 had already reached the Mametz–Contalmaison area, while the resistance of the northern shoulder of the defence had been stiffened by the addition of the 42nd and 62nd Divisions. The New Zealand Division were also nearing the battle. There was every hope that the arrival of these fresh troops would check the German advance and enable us to build up a new front west of the old Somme battle area ; for the German infantry was now almost as tired as our own troops in line and was far ahead of its supplies. The chief anxiety was as to whether these reserves would arrive in time, for the powers of resistance of the troops that had been fighting since the morning of March 21 were clearly nearing their limit. It was evident that there was going to be very little margin either way.

The margin of safety was a narrow one indeed, but it proved sufficient. During the night of March 25 the right centre of the Third Army was brought back to the general line Bray-sur-Somme, Albert, the left bank of the Ancre to Hamel, Hébuterne, Bucquoy, Boisleux St. Marc. The

[1] The transfer of the VIIth Corps to the Third Army has been represented as an injustice to the Fifth Army ! It is safe to say that the change did not appear in that light at the time either to the Fifth Army or to the VIIth Corps. The Fifth Army certainly had quite enough to do in attending to the battle front south of the river.

12th Division had been brought round to hold the Ancre sector, and though there was an ugly bulge and gap between Hamel and Hébuterne—due to the hurried falling back of individual units in what came to be known among the irreverent as 'the Pys to Pas Point-to-Point'—the New Zealand Division and a brigade of the 4th Australian Division, with the machine-gun battalions of the Household Cavalry Brigade, were being directed towards it. The other Australian troops were coming up in the Somme sector. The measures taken had the desired effect, and the evening of March 26 found the most critical stage of the battle north of the Somme safely over. Thenceforward, though heavy attacks continued for some days, and here and there the enemy effected local gains, there was no material change in this part of our line till our own troops took the offensive in their turn.

There was, however, one unfortunate incident that marred the close of this fight and added greatly to the difficulties of our troops south of the river. In the small hours of March 26 the VIIth Corps received from Third Army Headquarters and transmitted to its divisions orders to retire, if considered absolutely necessary, from the Bray–Albert line to the Ribemont–Albert line, that is to the line of the Ancre south of Albert. These orders, which were intended to be given effect to only if the German pressure on the Bray–Albert line became too great for our troops to withstand, were unfortunately interpreted by the 35th Division, then still on the Curlu–Hardecourt line, as forming part of the general scheme of withdrawal to the Ancre line, in which scheme a withdrawal to the Bray–Albert line was thought to be only a first stage. The order issued by the VIIth Corps was certainly at least ambiguous and open to this interpretation. The result was that on the afternoon of the 26th the troops under the command of the 35th Division commenced an ordered withdrawal from the Bray line to the Ancre line, although the pressure on the Bray line was inconsiderable. Belated efforts on the part of the VIIth Corps to stop this movement when it was in full

swing of course could have no effect. The enemy followed up slowly and in small parties, and on the morning of the 27th the right of the Third Army lay at Sailly-le-Sec, six miles behind the left of the Fifth Army which was still on the south bank of the Somme opposite Bray.

Meanwhile the course of the battle south of the Somme had been moving more slowly to its climax. Distances were much greater, and there was much more space in which to retreat before vital localities became endangered. Moreover, the line of the Somme had delayed the enemy's advance for at least thirty-six hours. The XIXth Corps were still holding the river line on the evening of March 25, when on the right centre of the Third Army front the enemy had already reached and crossed the Ancre. On the night of the 26th the enemy's troops opposite Sailly-le-Sec were little more than twelve miles from Amiens and at Colincamps his advance parties had been as near to Doullens with for the moment nothing in front of them. It was not until the night of the 28th that his troops got within a like distance of Amiens on the Villers-Bretonneux road. It was not until the early days of April that he reached at Castel on the French front the limit of his progress towards Amiens. He was then about eight miles distant from the town.

In the days following March 25, however, affairs on the southern portion of the battle front began to move more rapidly. If the difficulties of the Fifth Army due to the British troops north of the Somme being constantly in rear of its left flank had been great, they were fully equalled by those arising on its southern flank from the action of the French troops there. On the evening of the 25th the French front was on the Libermont Canal. On the evening of the 27th it was some distance west of Montdidier.[1] In two days the enemy had advanced in this sector between nineteen

[1] The importance of Montdidier is due to the fact that it is on one of the main routes from the north to Paris. The alternative St. Just route on the far side of the ridge of hills west and north-west of Montdidier was brought under German gun fire when at the end of the month the Germans crossed the Avre.

and twenty miles. It was stupendous, and not only the XVIIIth British Corps struggling to maintain connection between the French left and the British right, but the XIXth Corps also fighting stubbornly and successfully on the Rosières line throughout the whole of the 27th were placed in a position of the utmost peril. It will be remembered that it was on the day that Marshal Foch was appointed to the supreme command that this remarkable retreat commenced.

The relief of the 30th and 36th Divisions by the 62nd French Division and of the 20th Division by the 22nd French Division had been completed on the 25th, the infantry of the British divisions being directed to withdraw for 'rest and reorganisation.' That night the 36th Division were in the Guerbigny area, and the 30th were concentrating in the Hangest area. The respite was shortlived. On the morning of March 26 the 36th Division received news that the enemy had broken through in the neighbourhood of Roye, and fast on the heels of the information came the enemy's advanced troops. The 36th Division troops hurried from their 'rest' billets with scarce time to take up positions for defence before the enemy were upon them. The 30th Division was hastened back into line north of the Roye–Amiens road. The 20th Division, it is believed, never really got out of action at all. While to the south the Germans drove on without check to Montdidier and beyond, the remnants of these weary British divisions managed without artillery support to hang on to the general line of their positions across the Roye road until the evening of the 27th. The feat cost the 36th Division the bulk of the 108th Brigade, cut off at Andéchy.

The effect of the withdrawal of the 35th Division to the Sailly-le-Sec line and of the French to west of Montdidier was to leave the XIXth Corps on the night of the 27th some six miles in advance of the rest of the battle line. During the early part of the night of the 25th they had fallen back from the Somme to a temporary position on the Hattencourt–Chaulnes–Frise line, some 24,000 yards, which was

held by what was left of the 24th, 8th, 50th, 66th and 39th Divisions. Here they stayed during March 26, while every effort was being made to organise a more permanent position on the line Rouvroy–Proyart–Froissy, in touch, as was expected, with the Third Army at Bray. It was at this time that General Grant, under instructions from General Gough, commenced to reorganise the old Amiens defences on the line Moreuil, Mézières, Marcelcave, Hamel, with the composite body of troops afterwards known as Carey's Force. The enemy attacked the XIXth Corps strongly early on the 26th, and the whole line was soon heavily engaged, especially on the left. Our divisions succeeded nevertheless in shaking off the attack, and by the early afternoon the left and centre had carried out their withdrawal successfully to the Rosières line, the right following more slowly as on this side the German pressure was less intense.

The Rosières line, taken up on the afternoon of March 26, was held until the morning of the 28th with a gallantry and determination unsurpassed by any incident in a battle rich in glorious actions.[1] It was once more a race against time. Marshal Foch had acted promptly. Immediately upon his appointment to the supreme command he had given orders to bring Debeney's First Army into action at the point of danger, drawing French divisions from the front west of Reims for the purpose. At last the Reims bogey had—for a time—been laid, and our Allies were prepared to

[1] The splendid performance of the 8th Division in this fight is commented upon in the *Despatches*. In view of criticisms at times levelled against G.H.Q. officers, it may be of interest to point out that the senior staff officer of the 8th Division at this time was an officer who in 1916 and 1917 had served on the Operations Staff at G.H.Q. Similarly the G.S.O.1 of the 9th Division, which distinguished itself greatly in this battle, had been lately on the Operations Staff at G.H.Q. General Butler, who so ably commanded the IIIrd Corps, had till the end of 1917 been Deputy Chief of the General Staff. Another former member of the Operations Staff served with distinction as G.S.O.1 of the 1st Division. Another left G.H.Q. to command a Guards Battalion, won a bar to his D.S.O. and the V.C., and eventually took command of a brigade. Yet another, a civilian who started soldiering in 1915, after passing through G.H.Q. O.a. became G.S.O.1 of the Guards Division. No doubt there are other instances of the same kind.

act as the British Commander-in-Chief had so long urged them to do. Yet it takes time to move armies, and a manœuvre is not executed because the order for it has been issued. Days would pass before Debeney could make himself felt, and meanwhile the line had to be held. The Fifth Army had issued orders to the XVIIIth and XIXth Corps in the afternoon of the 26th that the line Guerbigny – Rouvroy – Rosières – Proyart was to be maintained at all costs until the arrival of French troops said to be moving to the relief of those Corps. The troops of both Corps responded splendidly ; but the promised relief was long coming—so far as the XIXth Corps was concerned it never came—and meanwhile the unfortunate mistake north of the Somme and the disastrous retreat of the newly-arrived French divisions uncovered both flanks of their position.

Our divisions had been told to hold on at all costs and put every man into the fight. They did so ; and the result was that when on the evening of the 27th the enemy crossed the Somme in strength at Morcourt and farther west, and pushed south-west to Lamotte on the Villers-Bretonneux road, it looked as though the whole of what had been the centre of the Fifth Army was doomed. The subsequent withdrawal on the 28th to the Mézières–Marcelcave–Hamel line was a performance all the more wonderful. It was accomplished under the most distressing conditions. It must be remembered that the men who had held the Rosières line for thirty-six hours had been fighting, most of them, for a full week, marching in that time great distances with scanty time for food and less for sleep. They had made up their minds to a last stand, and then had found the enemy behind them on both flanks with the promised relief no nearer. They were asked once more to commence a fighting retreat. There is little wonder that when the withdrawal began discipline and organisation broke down in places, and officers were driven at times to force their men at the muzzle of their revolvers to halt and face the enemy. The wonder is that the withdrawal was accomplished and that the Corps

remained as a whole a fighting force. It could not have been accomplished had not the German infantry been for the most part as tired as ours. British and German infantry could be seen at times marching in sight of each other wearily westwards, and when the British were too tired to take another step and lay down panting for an hour's rest, the German line stopped too, glad of the respite. Good fresh troops on either side could have swept the opposing line away almost without resistance.[1]

Some idea of the state of affairs can be gathered from the fact that in their retreat the 8th and 24th Divisions completely crossed each other's line of march. Notwithstanding, before midnight the withdrawal had been effected to the Amiens defence line, and once more disaster had been avoided. The situation indeed remained most critical; but so far as the British front was concerned the worst was over. During the night of the 27th the arrival of additional French divisions had at last set free the divisions of the XVIIIth Corps, and on the 31st the first of the IIIrd British Corps infantry divisions reached the British front south of the Somme. These troops, tired and reduced in numbers as they were, sufficed to turn the scale, and from the night of March 29 the British front south of the Somme definitely began to stabilise. In this connection it is only right to point out that General Gough did not hand over command to General Rawlinson till 4.30 P.M. on the 28th. He may fairly claim, therefore, to have fought this tremendous battle to the threshold of its successful conclusion.

The French, although now present in strength and meeting a tired enemy with fresh troops, were not so speedily successful in establishing their front; for on March 31 the enemy attacked them on a front of some ten miles from Montdidier

[1] Reference is made in the *Despatches* to the splendid action of the British airmen in this stage of the battle. When other reserves failed a great concentration of British aeroplanes was affected and maintained south of the Somme. Airmen joined directly in the infantry battle, and by their courage and skill did much to delay the German advance. The assistance they gave at this time should not be forgotten, though lack of space forbids description of their work.

to Moreuil, crossed the Avre river, and made progress to a depth of some three miles on the west bank. There is a marked contrast in the effects produced by the intervention of fresh troops on the British and French fronts respectively in the later stages of the battle. In so far as the difference was due to the manner in which the French divisions were hurried up, it furnishes a final criticism upon the short-sightedness of the French command in so long refusing to recognise the character of the German offensive.

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While the fate of the southern front was still hanging in the balance, the enemy struck on March 28 the blow that was intended to set the northern front once more in movement. The incidents of this attack form an instructive commentary upon the question of the sufficiency or otherwise of the British dispositions on March 21. The tactics employed by the enemy appear to have been precisely the same as those of the opening assault of the battle. A general attack over a wide front—some twenty miles from Puisieux to beyond Oppy—was accompanied by and was intended to disguise a violent irruption by a strong concentration of divisions upon comparatively narrow sectors on either side of the Scarpe, the object being to overwhelm these selected portions of the line attacked and effect a deep penetration in strength sufficient to enable the British defences on the remainder of the battle front—including the Vimy Ridge—to be taken in flank and rear and rolled up. The weather on March 28, however, was clear, and the tactics that had prevailed against the elastic system of defence in the fogs of March 21 and 22 broke down completely and with appalling loss in the clear weather of a week later. Granted that our line on the 28th east of Arras was more strongly held than that of the Fifth Army on the 21st, and that our defences were more complete, can it be said that these were the decisive factors ?

The divisions on which the chief weight of the assault fell were the 3rd (VIth Corps), 15th and 4th (XVIIth Corps), and the 56th (XIIIth Corps), though the front of attack

extended in strength as far south as the Puisieux sector, involving the Guards and 31st Divisions (VIth Corps) and the 42nd and 62nd Divisions (IVth Corps). Local attacks were delivered also at Hamel and Dernancourt. On the morning of the 28th the 62nd and 42nd Divisions, both of which had been engaged in heavy fighting since March 25, were holding a front of some 8000 yards ; the three divisions of the VIth Corps, of which the 3rd had been in action since March 21, and the Guards and 31st since the 22nd, were together holding a front of nearly 18,000 yards ; the two divisions of the XVIIth Corps were on a front of 9000 yards, and the 56th Division held a front of 7500 yards, having taken over 1500 yards from the Canadians on the morning of the battle. There was therefore a total frontage of 42,500 yards for eight divisions, of which only three were fresh, or an average of 5300 yards per division. This compares not unfairly with the 4700 yards average of the Third Army and the 6750 yards average of the Fifth Army on March 21. It has been seen that on the 60,000 yards battle front of the Fifth Army the battle zone was entered in four places on the 21st, the two serious breaches being on the fronts of divisions holding respectively fronts of 5500 yards and 6000 yards. On the same day the front system of the Third Army battle zone was captured on a front of nearly eight miles. In the circumstances, therefore, in which the battle was fought on March 21, it is clear that a division on a front of 4700 yards was overstretched equally with a division on a 6750 yard front, and, disregarding for the moment the question of reserves, the Third Army had no better chance of resisting the German attack than had the Fifth Army.

Consider now that in clear weather on March 28, divisions, most of them tired, holding average fronts greater than those of the Third Army on March 21, utterly defeated a great German attack without losing a yard of their battle zones, without losing the whole even of their forward zones, *and without calling on outside reserves.* The tremendous power of the elastic system of defence in depth in clear weather, when artillery, infantry and machine guns can co-operate

effectively from the first moment of the opening bombardment to the last hour of the battle, could not be more emphatically illustrated. In the face of such an experience, even allowing for the greater strength of the prepared defences held by us on the new portion of the battle front astride the Scarpe and for the smaller scale of the attack, it can scarcely be said that, few as they were, the task set to the divisions of the Fifth Army on March 21 would necessarily have been beyond their strength in ordinary weather. General Butler, whose Corps held the longest and least prepared of the Corps fronts of the Fifth Army, has left it on record that even as things were, 'in almost every case where the advance of the enemy could be seen and fire brought to bear, the German advance was held up.' Compare this with the experience of the 62nd Division on March 28 : 'At 10.30 A.M. the enemy attacked along the whole front of the two right battalions of the 186th Brigade. The attack, which was made in great strength and pressed with determination, was renewed several times, but was decimated by rifle and Lewis gun fire, and on no occasion succeeded in reaching our front line. Over 200 dead were reported to be lying in front of a single company of one of these battalions.' It would almost seem as if the only difference numbers in the attack make to a properly located machine-gun defence, when there is light and time to see, is to provide a better target.

The collapse of the attack on Arras was the death-blow to the successful development of the ambitious plan that had started so hopefully for the enemy on March 21. The great effort to break down the northern shoulder of our scarcely re-established line, capture Arras and its encircling hills, and open out to the German Army a way of advance in a district where there was no wide area of devastation to encumber its communications, had been crushed in one day by our troops in line. Five months later, Haig was to do what Ludendorff failed to accomplish ; but with a more flexible strategy and better material means. Meanwhile, the northern British battle front was safe, and with the

gradual stiffening of the Allied line south of the Somme the greatest German battle of the war came to an end.

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One word in conclusion upon more general aspects of the battle. It has been urged in criticism of the British pre-battle dispositions that the weakness of the Fifth British Army imperilled the whole line ; that a chain is no stronger than its weakest link, that a bridge is useless if one arch be broken though all the others stand ; that a girder to resist successfully a great stress must be equally strong along its whole length. Reasons have been given above for the conclusion that, weak as they were, the troops of the Fifth Army were not asked to do the impossible ; though they were asked to and cheerfully did accept a risk known to be grave. That, however, is not the whole answer to such arguments. The fuller answer is that the analogies relied on are false analogies, leading to conclusions militarily unsound. War is an affair of dynamics rather than of statics. In the long run in war the hammer always gets the better of the anvil, and the chief concern of any general temporarily thrown upon the defensive must be to preserve the power to strike. For this purpose, it is better to be weak at known and chosen points than to be strong at none. The resistance of an army to attack is not the resistance of a girder or bridge to stress, nor does it in any way resemble it. Two-thirds of a bridge left standing may be useless for traffic, but two-thirds of an army with its communications safe and its organisation unbroken may decide the fate of Empires. An army is a living active force, deriving no small portion of its power from movement and momentum. Victory depends less on the capacity to oppose an equal strength of resistance at all points than on the ability to strike telling blows at selected points. The principle applies to defence as well as attack, for disposition for defence must be governed by the knowledge that the pressure will not be equal along the whole line, but that the assailant will select his points of attack, and there strike with all the force he can muster. If, therefore, there are sectors of a

defensive front which lie close to vital centres of communications, and other sectors behind which lie wide stretches of defensible country with no strategic objectives for great distances, it follows that the first-mentioned sectors must be given the priority in the allocation both of troops in line and of reserves. So long as the commander of the defence retains an effective striking force in his hands, and the organisation of his forces as a whole is not thrown out of gear, local defeat does not involve ultimate defeat.

The disposition of the British forces in France on March 21 was subject to these principles and considerations. So certain was our knowledge of the front of attack that more than half our army could be committed in advance to meet it ; but the mistake was not made of attempting to strip the northern and more important front too soon, nor yet of equalising our strength of resistance over the whole of the battle front itself. The strength of our defence was nicely graduated in accordance with the varying importance of different sectors, the probabilities of the battle, and the resources at our disposal.

The skill and judgment exercised was proved by the result. Like a mighty tree with its roots fast anchored to the great bastion of the Vimy Ridge, the British Army bowed to the fierce hurricane that swept upon it on March 21. Its branches were whirled back westwards, whipping and bending in the gale ; but the trunk stood unbreakable, and the grip of its roots could not be loosed. Such is a more true analogy, and Ludendorff acknowledged its truth when he struck so savagely at Arras.

CHAPTER VII

'UNITY OF COMMAND'[1]

No subject in the latter part of the war aroused much keener interest and discussion than 'unity of command.' It was even more often referred to than the maxims of Clausewitz. Its place of origin, the identity of its inventors or introducers, are to this day disputed. Claims—largely civilian—for Great Britain and France and America in this connection have been put in. Possibly Germany may also, unknown to us, have entered the competition because, after all, well before even the Nivelle affair, she had imposed 'unity of command' on her Austrian Ally.[2]

But it does not signify where the idea was originally

[1] For the sake of convenience, the expression 'unity of command' is used throughout this chapter in its conventional sense of a generalissimo over all, as between March 26 and November 11, 1918. But having carefully examined the facts as to the commands in 1916, 1917 and 1918, we have reached the conclusion that actually there was at least as much unity in the first of these years as in the second or third.

[2] The exact relations between the Austrian and German commands in the earlier part of the war are not yet clear. In 1916 the Kaiser became Commander-in-Chief of the military forces of all the Central Powers. Before, there seems to have been no acknowledged machinery of 'unity of command.' The southern half of the enemy front was directed from Austrian G.H.Q. at Teschen—a city the position of which baffled British statesmanship even as late as 1919. The northern half was directed from Kovna; elsewhere by Hindenburg, who was directly responsible to Falkenhayn. Conrad, the Austrian Commander-in-Chief, was not under Falkenhayn, but as the Austrian troops when unassisted by German units were almost always beaten, Conrad had in practice to take directions from the ally. Yet Mackensen was in 1915 nominally receiving his orders from Teschen. It would seem that Germany at that stage had not quite imposed her will on the Austrians. Germany, by the way, seems to have had some difficulties of the 'unity of command' order even on the Western Front at a late period, Rupprecht not being always amenable to the proposal to hand over his reserves in the north to the Crown Prince opposite the French front.

dreamt of or played with. What signifies is why and when it was decided on and adopted during the German offensive of 1918. Once that is cleared up, the other conflicting claims as to copyright need not concern us at all. Fortunately, it is easily cleared up. This thing rests on indisputable evidence.

It will be recalled that Haig, with his Chief of Staff, met Pétain on the night of March 24, 1918, at Dury, when the line of the Somme had been forced and the position was very menacing. He was given most distinctly to understand from Pétain that, if the Germans continued to press on towards Amiens, the French troops then concentrating about Montdidier would be withdrawn in a south-west direction in order to cover Paris. Pétain announced that orders would have to be given to these troops accordingly. There is not the faintest doubt as to this. In fact the orders were actually issued. Therefore Haig returned to his headquarters at Beaurepaire and wired to London requesting the Secretary of State for War and the C.I.G.S. to come over immediately. He had reached the definite conclusion that the only way to avert a disaster was for the Allies to appoint some hard-fighting, resolute French general as generalissimo who would see to it that this idea of moving south-west to cover Paris was abandoned and that the French troops should stand and fight in order to save Amiens and preserve the junction between the two armies. At once he thought of Foch,[1] with whom he had been associated on the Somme in 1916 and at Ypres in 1914. This conclusion he communicated first to the British authorities mentioned and later to Clémenceau.[2]

[1] At the time stranded, virtually, at Versailles, the general reserve scheme having fallen through, fortunately for himself and for the Allies.

[2] Some of the silliest statements in regard to the war on the Western Front 1916-1918 have been made by, respectively, the political supporters and the political opponents of Mr. Lloyd George, and been accepted as gospel by one or the other—and, what is much more unfortunate, have deceived the public. Which of these two bodies of political propagandists has at times spread the more absurd statements it might be hard to say. In regard, for example, to the appointment of Foch, one body has declared that Mr. Lloyd George discovered Foch, and long before March 24 wanted

It was intended that a meeting of French and British should take place next morning, March 25, at Abbeville. But when the special train from Paris reached Abbeville only General Weygand was in it. Accordingly the British Commander-in-Chief gave him a letter for Clémenceau and Foch. He pointed out that the obvious intention of the Germans was to force apart the Allied Armies. He urged that, at all costs, this must be prevented, and begged the French to decide at once to concentrate a sufficient force astride the Somme. Further, he pointed out that there was now no danger in Champagne, owing to the great number of German divisions we had already identified on our front.

All clear enough so far. But at this point some confusion has arisen through Lord Milner having missed Haig's message of March 24. The Prime Minister had asked Lord Milner to 'run across' to France to discover what was the position as regards the German offensive and report to the Cabinet. Accordingly Lord Milner crossed soon after midday on March 24, but failed to get into touch with Haig till March 26 at Doullens. On the evening of the 24th he saw General Davidson, Headquarters Staff, at Montreuil, who gave him a sketch of the position on the front of the Third and Fifth Armies. He went on to Versailles and slept there. Next morning, March 25, he motored to Paris and saw Clémenceau, who declared that, come what might, the connection between the French and British Armies must be maintained, and that both Commanders-in-Chief must throw in their reserves to prevent the threatened breach.

Here it should be stated that Haig on the same day discussed the position with the C.I.G.S. They agreed it was imperative to bring in Foch as leader in order to guard against the separation of the French and British Armies.

On the afternoon of the 25th, Lord Milner with the French

him as Generalissimo; whilst the other body has declared that Haig long before March 24 wanted Foch as Generalissimo but that Lloyd George would not allow it. Neither has striven, before spreading such silly stories, to acquaint itself with even the elementary facts.

President and Foch and Clémenceau went to Compiègne, and there was a discussion in which Pétain gave an account of the position on the Fifth Army's front, and of his plan as to the French reserves. He said that six divisions were already on the spot and engaged, and that he was bringing up nine more from the south and north. He could do no more at present, but hoped to later : he expected a German attack to the south.

There is no doubt this meeting left on the minds of the French and British authorities present a pronounced feeling that Pétain—concerned by the possibility of an attack about Reims—was not prepared to throw in his reserves promptly and whole-heartedly.

As we have seen, he certainly was not.

But the question of the French reserves, though of pressing importance, was not really the paramount one. What caused the British Commander-in-Chief to send his wire on the night of the 24th was Pétain's statement about falling back south-west to cover Paris. That must be emphasised, and emphasised again. The British public has hitherto known nothing about this. It has remained a profound secret in this country except to a few people. Thus the real and immediate cause of the appointment of Foch to the supreme command was unknown.[1]

Yet it was more or less common knowledge among the French. *La Bataille de Foch*, by M. Raymond Recouly, a special correspondent of the *Matin*, deals freely with this subject. The book presents sundry matters from a marked French point of view. In it the battle of August 8 is a Franco-Britannic affair. Dealing with the Lys offensive, the author records how 'Les Anglais perdent Bailleul,' how 'Les Anglais reculent encore et perdent Wytschaete'; and so on. He admits that on April 25 'le mont Kemmel, défendu par deux divisions françaises et une anglaise, est emporté par le corps alpin bavarois'—though 'nos troupes y ont fait d'ailleurs une magnifique défense'; he fails to

[1] The illuminating footnote of two lines on page 208 of the *Despatches* appears to have been overlooked.

add that next day in a counter-attack British troops retook Kemmel village but had to withdraw as the French side of that counter-attack did not materialise.

We are also furnished with a vivacious account of the Generalissimo darting about the scene south of the Somme at an earlier stage—calling on the Fifth Army to stand firm, in fact, getting those British fellows to put up a bit of a fight. It is unfortunate the map should show that at this time the French were retreating with precipitation on Montdidier.

However, M. Recouly's account is frankly French. One cannot but esteem his vivid patriotism. It is a pity we did not discover in 1919 and 1920 a few British Recoulys. Also, M. Recouly is fairly clear on the question about the threatened withdrawal to cover Paris—a withdrawal which would have snapped the connection between the Allied Armies, and let the enemy clean through. He says :—

'La situation se trouve définie par les ordres généraux de Pétain et Haig. Le premier de ces ordres présente : De maintenir groupées les forces françaises pour couvrir la capitale (mission essentielle) ; d'assurer la liaison avec les Anglais (mission secondaire) ; 'le second présente de faire tout le possible pour éviter une rupture avec les Français ; si l'on y est contraint, de se replier lentement en couvrant les ports du Pas de Calais.'

M. Recouly goes on to point out that there was a fatal divergency between these two aims—'visiblement, les instructions des grands chefs n'ont pas le même objet.' They indeed had not. Pétain's move, had it been carried out, would let the enemy in between the Allied Armies. We should have been compelled to retire towards the Channel ports, whilst the French were moving south-west —'to cover Paris.'

Even assuming that after a separation of the two armies, Pétain had managed to cover Paris, how long, one wonders, would he have succeeded in his purpose ? Perhaps a few weeks. The retirement of French troops on our right, at the time Pétain was considering how to cover Paris, scarcely

argues that Paris would have remained their secure headquarters for much longer had the French Government and the Allied Armies gone their divergent ways. These French troops on the spot were retiring at the close of March, though they were not at first very seriously attacked; and they were still retreating, as the map and the battle diaries show, after our line south of the Somme had begun to grow stable.

The author referred to—he is a useful peg in this matter—accurately defines the British principle: to do everything humanly possible to avoid a break between the two armies. That was the sound strategical plan.

Haig put general Allied interests first, and particular British interests second. The British 'mission essentielle' was 'maintain continuity of line,' 'mission secondaire' was the communications of the British Army; whereas the French line was first to cover Paris, next to keep touch with the British Army.

Let us imagine that on March 21 the Germans had struck their blow against not the Third and Fifth British Armies but against the First French Army to their right; and the French had been pressed back, though fighting hard, by overwhelming forces and that the right of our Fifth Army lightly attacked had swung west with the retreating French. Suppose in that case the British Commander-in-Chief resolving that, if the Germans continued to press on in the direction of Montdidier, he should have to withdraw in order to save the Channel ports. Could any justification be found for British strategy in such a case? Yet that was the French policy on March 24. The point is far too important to hush up or slur over to-day. It has to be plainly stated and insisted on.[1]

[1] There has been in France, as indicated, little secretiveness about the supreme desire to cover Paris, whether this led to a separation between the Allied Armies or not. Major Grasset, in his collection of Foch's *Precepts and Judgments*, assures us the reserves had to be disposed of in a manner that would check any serious advance on Paris; for such an advance would ruin the moral of the French people and compel the French Government to make peace with Germany. Oddly enough, this same book shows how

To return to the itineraries of the statesmen whom we left at Compiègne on the evening of March 25. Lord Milner seems to have thought from the discussion there that Foch did not differ substantially from Pétain's strategic plans. Surely he must have misunderstood! Foch declared that the danger of a German thrust to break between the French and British at Amiens was so great that risks must be taken in other directions to avert this disaster. Foch's line was Haig's line—to stand and fight in front of Amiens whatever happened, and, before everything, keep the Allied Armies together. The other line was, above all, to cover Paris.

The meeting at Compiègne over, Lord Milner returned to Paris and Versailles. Obviously, no decision as to the reorganisation of the Allied control could be reached without the presence and advice of Haig. Lord Milner had heard Pétain, Foch, Clémenceau, Poincaré, and others; but apparently he still laboured under the disadvantage of not knowing the line of the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army.

At Versailles he now learnt that Haig wished for a meeting at Doullens at 12 noon, March 26, as he had to meet his three Army Commanders, Horne, Byng, and Plumer, there. Lord Milner discussed the position with General Sir Henry Wilson, C.I.G.S., who suggested that both countries might well leave it to Clémenceau to decide on the best way to secure complete co-operation between the Allied Armies as to the reserves, etc. The suggestion struck Lord Milner as good.

At Doullens next morning there were three conferences—the first between Haig and his three Army Commanders; the second between these four together with the C.I.G.S. and Lord Milner; the third, the Allied conference.

At the first conference it was arranged that the armies of Horne and Plumer must extend their divisional fronts in

Foch himself must have held another view. Gambetta, says Foch, could not shake himself free of the superstition that the fate of a nation depends on the fate of its capital city. Gambetta conceived it his primary duty to relieve Paris. Hence his failure in the war of 1870.

order to set free certain divisions which would move at once to support our troops in front of Amiens ; and this despite the fact, well known, that a heavy German attack was impending in the north. The arrangement was communicated to Lord Milner at the second conference.

It was now, strange to say, that Lord Milner first learnt that Haig 'far from resenting—as I had been led to believe he might do—the thought of Foch's interference, rather welcomed the idea of working with the latter, about whom his tone was altogether friendly.'

Small wonder he did not resent and was friendly, considering that he had been the first to settle on Foch two days before and had forced the pace.

Lord Milner's sincerity impresses one throughout this comical tangle of talk and running to and fro of statesmen patriotic and perplexed, and never quite sure where they would get their dinner or sleep the night. But that he did not know the above essential fact till about noon on the 26th shows that humour is not necessarily absent from the tremendous tragedies of world war.

Lord Milner has been represented as the *Deus ex machina* ; who, amidst sundry counsels of imperfection (*e.g.* the appointment of M. Clémenceau as a sort of Generalissimo), solved the problem of Allied control by discovering—Foch.

It is, however, probable he would modestly prefer in this affair to go down to fame not as the *Deus* but rather as a quite serviceable part of the *machina*.

The proceedings at the Allied conference which followed are more or less familiar—such as Clémenceau's proposal appointing Foch to co-ordinate the action of British and French Armies, and the amended formula,[1] on Haig's suggestion, that all the armies on the Western Front should be included. But perhaps it is advisable to give a correct summary of the proceedings.

[1] This arrangement had in its turn to be amended on April 3 at a conference at Beauvais, when the Generalissimo's powers were more precisely defined at the suggestion of Haig. They needed to be. He may have experienced some difficulties with Pétain's Staff in getting his orders carried out.

Those present included M. Poincaré; M. Clémenceau; Lord Milner; General Foch; the British and French Commanders-in-Chief; General Weygand; General Sir H. Wilson; General Sir H. A. Lawrence; and General Montgomery, Chief of Staff of the Fourth Army.

Haig pointed out the absolute necessity for the French to hurry forward as large reinforcements as possible from the south to support the Fifth Army, which had been fighting without a pause since March 21.

Pétain said the Fifth British Army was no longer a fighting force. He explained the French situation and what action he had taken: the French, he said, were detraining at Moreuil and Montdidier. He explained the dangers involved by pushing these troops in by driblets. Nine divisions were engaged; fifteen were being brought up.

It was resolved that Amiens must be covered at all costs. The question was, how could this be done, and who was to replace the exhausted troops of the Fifth Army in front of Amiens? It was agreed that the British must hold on from Arras to the Somme; otherwise an even greater peril than the present one might ensue.

Pétain said the leading division from the north had to be moved up to Moreuil instead of detraining at Abbeville.

Foch insisted on the need of instant action and of impressing on all troops that they must give up no ground.

The British Commander-in-Chief indicated he could guarantee this without French aid provided the French did not uncover his flank south of the Somme.

It was agreed the French should hurry to the utmost all movements of their troops. Troops south of the Somme, British or French, were to be ordered to hold on, tired or not.

The French were to be responsible for the whole front south of the river.

Clémenceau stated his view that the burning question at present was not how many divisions could be spared from the French front, but how quickly reinforcements could arrive at the battle front. The French Commander-in-Chief explained how long it would take his troops to arrive.

Clémenceau pointed out that all now seemed agreed as to the principles and as to what British and French must do—the question was how to realise the measures involved in these principles.

Some private discussions followed between Ministers and the chief military leaders concerned. Afterwards, Clémenceau drew up a resolution proposing that Foch should be appointed 'to co-ordinate the operations of the Allied Armies about Amiens,' in order to cover that town.

But Haig pointed out the difficulty of such a task unless Foch had full authority over all the operations on the Western Front. Clémenceau agreed, and this revised proposal was accordingly adopted by the Allied Governments.

Thus we have seen how 'unity of command,' so styled, simply sprang out of the meeting between Pétain and Haig on March 24, 1918. Lord Kitchener's charter first to Sir John French, then to Haig, insisted on two cardinal points: (1) That closest co-operation between the Allied Armies must govern our policy; (2) that the post of British Commander-in-Chief was an independent one not to come under the orders of any Allied general further than the necessity of such co-operation might compel.

By the irony of events the second instruction had on a sudden crisis to be sacrificed to save the first. It had been temporarily relaxed in the spring of 1917, when the British War Cabinet was swept away by a wave of enthusiasm for Nivelle's dazzling project for destroying the German Army.[1] But the wave, having passed, left that Cabinet cold. It shivered at the mention of the term generalissimo. The Prime Minister, as we have seen, in a speech in the House of Commons in 1918 indicated he wanted no generalissimo.

What was the attitude of the French during the war over

[1] Mangin observes in *Comment finit la Guerre*, that the British action in placing the British Army under Nivelle in the spring of 1917 'fait le plus grand honneur à Lloyd George.' Certainly it would never have occurred to an Englishman to apply the word honour to the way in which the Nivelle intrigue was worked on this side of the Channel.

the appointment of a generalissimo ? They wished for it because they wished France to rank as the leader, the senior partner. Through the appointment of a generalissimo—and it was held in France as an axiom that he must be French—they considered that they would secure two substantial benefits.

One benefit would be more control over the British Army, which would help to make a larger number of British divisions relieve French divisions in the work of holding the line. Additionally, at least, a section of French military opinion held that French leadership was more scientific than British leadership : that our army for a long while past had been restricted to rather puny operations chiefly against Indian and African natives, and had no large conceptions as to what should be done in a modern European war. Though, it is true, there was also a strong feeling among French soldiers and civilians that the war had been mismanaged in 1914, 1915 and 1916 by French leadership. The strategy of Joffre during that period, and the offensives of Foch in 1915, were condemned as unprolific of good results and terribly costly to French man-power.

Another benefit which the appointment of a French generalissimo ('to co-ordinate the strategy') should give France would be the leading voice in the negotiations and treaty at the close of the war.

These two considerations counted greatly with patriotic Frenchmen. They believed that such an appointment would give them far more power and kudos during the war ; and, if the Allies overcame Germany, far more power and kudos for the purpose of the peace arrangement. The motive was natural and national.

The Nivelle period, and French comments, military and civilian, thereon, illustrate well the strength of these motives. Nivelle's French supporters and Nivelle's French opponents both praised the British War Cabinet for appointing him Generalissimo—though the latter, like the former, expressed regret that such an appointment was but of a temporary character. Nivelle has been condemned far

more sweepingly by French opinion than by British opinion. Some French writers would hardly allow a point in his favour. If they were obliged to admit he was useful at Verdun in the autumn and early winter of 1916, they would usually point to much greater work achieved early in that year at Verdun by Pétain. Nivelle indeed was, according to the large anti-Nivelle French school, a rash and thoroughly incompetent leader from the moment he undertook operations on a big scale. But when it came to the decision at Calais to appoint him Generalissimo—that, anyhow, was good!

In short, Nivelle ought never to have been chosen as Commander-in-Chief of the French Army: but, having been so appointed, it was quite right to appoint him, further, Generalissimo, with power to direct the British Army.

Nivelle in 1917 is, according to his French opponents, about to undertake unwise and probably disastrous operations. He should be curbed; and prevented from doing so. Still Mr. Lloyd George and M. Briand have at any rate taken an admirable step in creating him Generalissimo over both armies.

All this appears to be absurd and illogical. But it is at once understood when we look into the real motive, alike, of Nivelle's friends and Nivelle's opponents in France.

As to the enhanced powers during war which France would obtain through the appointment of a generalissimo, these did not altogether satisfy her most ardent citizens. In 1918 there was frequent complaint that, despite the appointment of a generalissimo, the British—Government as well as Higher Command—were not at all inclined to put their entire forces and organisation unreservedly at the disposal of French leadership. There was no complete amalgamation, it was objected. That was quite true. There fortunately was not: and it is certain that nations and human nature being what they are, there never will be, as between great Powers like France and Britain, a complete amalgamation in Allied warfare, whether there is or is not a generalissimo.

Have we any right to complain of France's attitude in

this matter? Surely, none. The offenders were not the French. The offenders were British statesmen, who, at the close of the war, proceeded to proclaim that it had been won by the genius and skill of our Ally's leader, thereby (1) deliberately slighting our own military leadership and (2) spreading widely an absolute untruth. But there is no evidence that the French asked for, or expected, such a false compliment to themselves at the expense of truth and of the British Army. It is true that some French writers adopted this line: but that was later, after British statesmanship had given them their cue.

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To return to the British view—even apart from the disagreeable experience over Nivelle's plan, was the Prime Minister's attitude, as indicated in his speech at the time, and was Mr. Asquith's attitude, unreasonable? 'Unity of command,' so styled, in 1918 turned out a success. With few very serious military dissensions—and with absolutely no military dissensions of which the public was allowed to learn at the time—it carried the Allies through the period of peril between March 26 and July 18, and thence through the period of victory to November 11 and the Armistice. But this by no means proves the Prime Minister was wrong in the doubts he expressed in his speech; or that Mr. Asquith was wrong. It does not prove Lord Kitchener was wrong in his charters to Sir John French and Sir Douglas Haig. The question remains an open one. Naturally, some people, impressed by the success achieved in 1918, will plump at all costs for a generalissimo—for a supreme leader who can co-ordinate the strategy. Others, including military experts, as well as civilians with judgment, will hold that success in this particular instance does not prove that the case for a generalissimo where Allied forces are concerned, has been reduced to an axiom in Euclid.

The principle of unity of control or 'unity of command' where a nation at war has only to think of itself, and where no great ally is concerned, is unassailable. There it is axiomatic. We all believe, absolutely, in that kind of 'unity

of command.' *Field Service Regulations, Part II.* of our own Army leaves us in no doubt about this. The first two paragraphs on the general principles of War Organisation lay it down, once and for all :—

'The successful issue of military operations depends primarily upon combination and unity of effort directed with energy and determination towards a definite object. Unity of control is essential to unity of effort. This condition can be ensured only by investing the supreme authority in one man, the C.-in-C. of the forces in the field ; by providing him with the means of exerting the required influence over the work and action of every individual. The main object of war organisation is to provide these means.'

Nothing could be sounder than that. Lord Haldane, who largely was the originator of the handbook, has a right to be satisfied over this definition of a great principle. But, unfortunately, the unity of control and the supreme authority here defined relate only to our own forces in the field, to our own supreme commander. There is no reference in the chapter on War Organisation, or in any part of *Field Service Regulations,* to an ally.

We are not told in these Regulations what must be done if the British Army takes the field in close co-operation with one or two other armies. That makes all the difference !

No one will blame Haldane and his military advisers for leaving this point out of consideration. They had enough to do, as it was, in drawing up their field regulations—and in fashioning a British expeditionary force for service overseas.

What is more, it is improbable that, when the time comes to issue a new edition of that handbook in the light of our experiences in the European War, the new edition will venture to put the view of Lord Kitchener and Mr. Asquith quite out of court.

Suppose we again go to war on land, sea, or both, against a powerful enemy, and have an ally or two to co-operate with, shall we arrange forthwith for 'unity of command' in

the sense of a generalissimo? We *may* do so forthwith. Our one or more allies *may* do so, provided there is a great disparity in force between the different armies or navies. Suppose, for instance, we again sent to the Continent a modest expeditionary force, and drew the line at that, we might place it at once under our ally's direction. It is not certain we should—it is possible we should. But it is an open question indeed whether we should do so if we were dispatching an army at all comparable in striking force and numbers to that of our ally.

Thus, 'unity of command' in the sense of a generalissimo is not to be taken as a foregone conclusion in any future war we may be involved in side by side with a powerful ally.

The arguments in favour of appointing at once a supreme head in the field, a generalissimo, for carrying on an allied campaign would be stronger provided—for one thing—we could saddle him somehow with the full responsibilities which he incurs in regard to the safety of his own army. Conceive him thus saddled, the paragraphs cited from *Field Service Regulations* would apply admirably to alliance in war.

It might then remain to discover the ablest leader, and appoint him at once.

Here [1] is a concrete, terrible instance of the difficulty of saying who is to be held responsible for very heavy—and culpable—casualties under allied 'unity of command' with a generalissimo.

In April 1918, at the request of Foch, five British divisions —the 8th, 19th, 21st, 25th, and 50th—had been moved to Champagne to relieve French troops in an area deemed quiet. These divisions formed the IXth Army Corps. They were made up partly of men who had suffered heavily in the two German offensives of March 21 and April 9 on the British lines, and partly of young recruits fresh from

[1] The whole story of this disaster is told in Chapter XI., but it is necessary to touch on it here, as it closely concerns the question under consideration.

home. The French Intelligence service, being ill-informed, felt sure there was no German attack impending on this sector, which included the Chemin-des-Dames. The fear of a German offensive here had kept back the French troops from coming swiftly to our aid in the battles of the Somme and Lys in March and April 1918. But it did not come then, and therefore it had by May apparently passed out of the thoughts of our Ally. The British corps commander and some of his divisional generals had their doubts, which were shared by our G.H.Q.—and also by several French subordinate leaders. We more than once expressed these doubts to the French leaders, from Foch downwards, but they insisted that all was nice and quiet and satisfactory on this sector; that it was well fitted for broken divisions in need of rest and training.

Still, we remained uneasy. The corps commander rightly criticised the disposition of the troops, his own and the adjoining French, for defence. He respectfully pointed out that they were not placed deep enough, the resistance being concentrated too much at the front. The British had learnt their lesson in this matter and they wished to apply it. But remonstrance was in vain, though some of the local French officers were in sympathy with it.

The commander of the Sixth French Army, General Duchêne, after hearing the arguments, closed the discussion once and for all with a firm 'J'ai dit!'

On May 26 two German prisoners were taken, a private and an officer. The former, being questioned, admitted that a German attack was to take place next day. The latter at first declared that no attack was to take place, but afterwards—for very good reasons—he changed his attitude and gave information similar to that of the private. It was then of course too late to make any change in the dispositions—still less in the divisions. The Germans attacked heavily next day. They flung back the French on our left, and the attack on our unfortunate divisions was extremely severe. Their resistance won for them the highest praise from General Maistre, a gallant French soldier then in

command of the army group in this area. But they suffered very heavy casualties. In fact, they were cut to pieces.

Now who was to blame ? Clearly the IXth British Corps Commander was not. He had quickly foreseen the danger. He had done all he could to warn the French of it. But to no effect. Were British G.H.Q. and Haig to blame for this disaster ? Well, even their severest censors—and they had never been in danger of a lack of censors—might hesitate to put the blame on them in this particular instance. They made the necessary enquiries, received assurances from the French Higher Command ; and, on their repeating their enquiries, the assurances were repeated. Had Haig stiffly declined to send these troops to French aid, or recalled them before May 27, he would have been declared by the French disloyal to the Generalissimo, guilty of a plot against 'unity of command.'

The blame clearly lay with the French Higher Command and its Intelligence branch. French leadership was responsible. But the responsibility was purely nominal ; for how could we visit punishment on Marshal Foch for this appalling blunder, though it cost us thousands of lives ? It must always be impossible to proceed against a leader who is not your own national ; and, as it happened here, no British leader could by any stretch of imagination be fastened on to as the sinner and made to do penance for this blunder.

The sufferers were the troops of the British divisions. They were sacrificed in great numbers because the French Intelligence was bad, because the disposition of the troops in line was bad, and because French G.Q.G. had not completely studied the matter.

It may be asked, ' Why refer to this tragedy of the gallant, ill-fated IXth Corps on the Aisne of which nothing was made known to the British public ? Why not allow it to be forgotten entirely ? Better, hush it up. Is not March 21, 1918, in the era of independent command bad enough, without recalling May 27, 1918, in the era of "unity of command ? " '

The answer is, we are bound to consider well such facts in weighing the arguments for and against one great democratic nation placing its troops under another. France, the United States and Italy will assuredly take such concrete cases as that of May 27, 1918, into their careful consideration should they again be involved in war alliances. They will consider the defects both of the independent command and of the unified command with a generalissimo. To suppress the truth in regard to either is weak and bad. Four years after the war is over, it is as unwise to conceal the defects of unified command as of independent command. They have to be viewed and discussed as fully and dispassionately as the advantages and disadvantages of, say, secret treaties and open treaties between nations.

Unfortunately it is impossible to make a French supreme leader fully responsible for the safety of British forces or a British supreme leader fully responsible for the safety of French forces. The major—the real—share of responsibility must rest ultimately on the French commander-in-chief or on the British commander-in-chief. If the supreme head orders the commander-in-chief of the Ally to undertake an operation which turns out disastrous and leads to a great loss of life, on whom will the responsibility fall—who will be called to account and punished for the blunder ? Inevitably, if any one is called to account, it will be the commander-in-chief who obeys the order. There is no way out of this dilemma. It is the second in command who is responsible. It is he who is punishable in regard to the lives and safety of the army under him ; not the first in command—except in regard to troops of his own nation. True, the home government can, to signify its displeasure after the event, withdraw its own army from the direction of the generalissimo. But it can, it very likely will, visit its displeasure in a much more direct manner on the second in command. It will call him sternly to account. He is its servant. He is its national. He is responsible for the safety of the army he commands.

People who suppose Haig's responsibility was lessened

by the appointment of Foch know little enough about the campaign between March and November 1918. Haig's responsibility, if anything, was increased.[1] We shall see this clearly enough later on. He did not complain when difficulties arose. That was not his way. The appointment of a generalissimo had to be made to prevent a separation of the Allied Armies, and thereafter he strove to make it a success. He did for Foch what he tried to do for Nivelle. But we shall find, in at least one instance, the British Government pulling one way and the French Generalissimo pulling hard the other way ; and between them—the British Commander-in-Chief ! A predicament that suggests, ' How happy could I be with either, were t'other dear charmer away.'

In another case we shall find the same Government quiescent because it did not really comprehend what was going on ; the Generalissimo pressing for a clumsy and wholly

[1] As to this question of responsibility, a friend sends me this useful comparison between leaders :—

' The common fault of the attempts at " unity of command " was that they sought to give control to one man while leaving responsibility with another. Both Joffre and Foch understood the situation, and made allowances for it, even though on occasion they strained their authority as far as they could. Nivelle does not seem to have had so keen an appreciation of his and Haig's position. His directives took the form of orders, such as he might have addressed to his own army commanders, and he even went so far as to attempt to send orders direct to intermediate formations of the British Army. This attempt to assume absolute control went beyond even the text of his appointment, and would have made Haig's position, answerable as he was not to Nivelle but to the War Cabinet and his own Government, absolutely impossible. It needed the personal qualities of exceptional men to create and maintain the essentials of " unity of command " in the practical working and co-operation of the two armies. These qualities were present in 1916 and in 1918, though the system nominally was different. They were absent in spring 1917, though the system then was not essentially different from that of 1918. Nivelle confounded theory with practice, not perhaps altogether his fault, for he had not the experience of the Allied working that Joffre and Foch had had, and to him a thing that was called a spade was a spade. Supreme command to him meant the power to give orders and the right to expect unquestioned obedience from all nominally under his command. Joffre without the formula and Foch with it, both having had experience of the ways of politicians, were able to make sure of the essentials by not insisting on more than Haig could give.'

unscientific operation to be undertaken immediately ; and the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army certain that it is wholly the wrong operation and can only lead to a costly British casualty list.

In a third possible—and, here again, an actual—predicament, the two leaders in the field may hold a diametrically opposed view as to the right use of a certain army for whose security and welfare its commander-in-chief is responsible ; and, on the case being referred to the home Government, that authority may hang the matter up ; consider it ; sleep over it.

But, one may be told, ' " unity of command " was tried in 1918, the leader of the British forces himself forced it to the front, and it proved a success : therefore these arguments are only bogies.'

The inference is wrong. ' Unity of command ' with a Generalissimo in 1918 was a success because Foch and Haig, the Commander-in-Chief of the Army which did the lion's share of the work in the final stage, worked well together ; and because Foch had the common sense in at least two critical instances to adopt Haig's plan of operations, which were—to be quite frank — incomparably better thought out and more scientific than his own, as we shall find presently.

Both, moreover, were what is known as resolute ' fighting men,' set against yielding ground except under sheer compulsion. The stand and fight spirit inspired both when in difficulties ; which both promptly converted into forward and fight when the initiative came their way. ' Look before you leap,' urged the War Cabinet when one of them was drawing near to the Drocourt–Quéant switch lines. For an answer—he had already leapt, after carefully looking. ' Take care what you do with our divisions,' entreated the same Cabinet when a pressing demand came from Foch to send troops from Flanders to work in with the French to the south. For answer, as we shall find, Haig sent his troops forthwith—and General Smuts turned home to comfort as best he could those who were not in the forward and fight mood.

The two fighting leaders differed, at times distinctly, over the method of an operation. It would be foolish to hide that. Great professional soldiers, devoted to the study of war, will differ thus at seasons. By tact, by give and take, these difficulties were overcome. The partnership happened, as we have said, to be a well-assorted one. In war, complimentary references, not entirely sincere, have often to be made to the relations between Allied leaders in the field. It is left to history to disclose the truth. But in this instance insincerity is not called for. The French leader and the British leader, through natural fighting bent and the agreed strategic aims they started with in March, could pull together.

The writer has put the question more than once to those who, through full knowledge of the inner history of this period, are certainly qualified to form an opinion in the matter: Suppose Foch had been in Pétain's place in March 1918 when the German offensive started, would it have been necessary to change the system of command?

What happened in March 1918, after the German blow fell on the Third and Fifth Armies, was, as we have seen, this: Pétain, the French Commander-in-Chief—though not Pétain alone but French military opinion generally, and the French Intelligence department at G.Q.G.—believed that, behind this attack on the British, Ludendorff was secreting a still bigger plan of attack on the French. That was their conviction on March 21 and throughout, at least, the remainder of the month. This French military opinion was shared by the French Government. They held, wrongly but with conviction, that the real aim of Ludendorff was Paris. Paris must, in the French view, at all costs be defended: and it was this consideration, which held back the French troops during the first days of the German offensive against the Third and Fifth British Armies, and led to the decision of the French Commander-in-Chief, intimated at Dury on the night of March 24, that, if the Germans continued to press on towards Amiens as they were then doing, it would be necessary to withdraw the French

troops then assembling about Montdidier and fall back in a south-west direction to cover Paris.

Now, supposing Foch, instead of losing his command in the field as he did in December 1916, had then, or thereafter, been made Commander-in-Chief, would he have been influenced on March 21 and the following days, as Pétain was influenced, by the belief that the main German blow was to fall almost at once on the French front, the goal being Paris ? Would French reserves, in such a case, have arrived much earlier on the scene, the Fifth Army have received adequate assistance in time, and the German advance on Amiens have made much less progress than it actually did ?

There are two theories as to this. One is that had Foch been Commander-in-Chief in March 1918 (*a*) French troops would probably have arrived earlier and more effectively on the scene ; and (*b*) that, anyhow, there would have been no immediate peril of the two armies being separated in order that the French troops might fall back south-west to cover Paris should the Germans continue to press on towards Amiens.

The other theory is that Foch as Commander-in-Chief would have been subject to the same pressure by Government as Pétain was, and that he would have been driven to much the same course as Pétain was. Let us examine this point of view first.

As we know, Foch, having been brought from Versailles —where he was virtually stranded—and appointed Generalissimo, adopted Haig's strategy, the first essential of which was that, at all costs, the junction between the two armies must be preserved. But it must always be remembered that, owing to the extreme peril of the position, he was, as an emergency measure, appointed in order to take a line, clearly, not identical with Pétain's. Otherwise why should Haig have resolved on March 24 to bring him in, and why should the French and British have agreed to this change in the command on the Western Front ?

On the other hand, conceive Foch simply as Commander-

in-Chief on March 21 onwards—would he have been empowered by the French Government to take the British military view; and have declared that the French reserves must be hurried on to the scene directly the offensive started, and that the strategy must be, first and foremost, to preserve the junction between the Allied Armies, Paris or no Paris?

It is true that Foch himself, writing on military matters long before, had declared the notion that at all costs the capital of an invaded country must be defended was a wrong one. But Government pressure, behind which is the nation, must always be a most difficult thing for even the most resolute soldiers to resist successfully in a crisis like that of March 21: and, moreover, in this particular case there was the very strong belief, not only French civilian but French military, that the Germans meant, after driving back the Third and Fifth British Armies to a certain point, to switch off to a greater attack against the French in the Reims area. Pétain's position in the circumstances of March 1918 was very difficult, certainly; and Foch's position, had he been in Pétain's place at the time, would have been the same. He would have been prevented, whatever his own strategic principles, from hurrying up the French reserves in time to check effectively the assault on the Third and Fifth British Armies, because of the French Government's dread of a coming bigger offensive delivered on the Reims front and aimed at Paris.

It is pointed out, in support of this view, that even after the appointment of Foch as Generalissimo, the belief still remained strong that a greater German thrust was coming against the French: that the French Government, though it had given Foch exceptional powers of co-ordination, and set him over Pétain, remained profoundly disturbed by the supposed threat to Paris; and that, after the Germans had started their new offensive on the Lys, French reserves were tardy in their arrival on that new scene; that they were denied absolutely to the British Commander-in-Chief on April 9; and that, though they were at length promised by

Foch on April 10, they did not begin to take over a portion of our line there till April 19.

How, in face of these hard facts, it is asked, can we feel confident that in March, at the start of the first German offensive, Foch as Commander-in-Chief would have been empowered to come in plenty of time to the effectual assistance of the Third and Fifth British Armies attacked by the massed German divisions ?

The other point of view is that Foch, thanks to his combative character and his strategic ideas, would, notwithstanding Government pressure, and the French military belief that the Germans were about to attack on the Reims front and strike at Paris, have insisted on hurrying up the French reserves sooner ; and that the danger of the French troops about Montdidier withdrawing south-west to cover the capital would not have faced us as it actually did on March 24. In such a case a change in the system would not have been necessary, and the two Commanders-in-Chief could have worked together successfully during the German offensives between March and July and later during the Allied advance to victory. If it is objected that victory could not have been achieved through such an arrangement because the two leaders would in all probability have differed in their later plans, the reply is that under the revised arrangement they differed essentially in several instances —for example, over the exceedingly important question of an attack in August on the Roye–Chaulnes position—yet composed their differences and worked through to victory : and this they could have done just the same under the system existing before Doullens.

It must remain a matter of opinion. Character—and this latter point of view is founded on that—counts greatly. But the other view—viz., that Foch would have found himself, as Commander-in-Chief, embarrassed exactly as Pétain was by the attitude of the French Government and the supposed deadly German menace to Paris—is founded certainly on very impressive facts. We cannot overlook the slowness with which, even after Foch's elevation and

his concurrence in the first article in Haig's strategical creed, the French reserves came north and were not suffered to relieve us even in the second German offensive till April 19. Who can seriously doubt that uneasiness about Paris was still a powerful deterrent ?

The foregoing relates only to the question whether or not Foch as Commander-in-Chief in March would have succeeded in co-ordinating in time with the British where Pétain did not succeed.

But suppose Foch had, in view of the expected German offensive, been appointed Generalissimo in January or February 1918—would the catastrophe of March then have been avoided ? There was at that period, it will be recalled, a great deal of talk about the desirability of appointing a generalissimo : the French naturally favouring it as they had all through, but the British Government, after their Nivelle experiences, being against it. Here, certainly, everything points to the conclusion that, with Foch as Generalissimo in January or February, the catastrophe would *not* have been warded off. Far, indeed, from it. Foch's position must then have depended, even more than it did in March and April after the blow had fallen, on the support of the French Government. His Intelligence service would have told him the same story it told Pétain. Is it reasonable to suppose that he would have been readier than Pétain to accept the British Intelligence and to make light of the French Intelligence ? Assuming that he had not been readier than Pétain to accept the British and reject the French Intelligence :—then there would not have been an Hypothèse 'A' and 'B' but a scheme for the defence of the Reims sector, to which British as well as French reserves would have been pledged. Haig would have had to determine whether Foch's position as Generalissimo entitled him to jeopardise the British Army for the sake of a French theory which he—Haig—regarded as totally unsound. We know very well the decision he would have come to ! and surely, as a result of that decision, either he would have been dismissed, or 'unity of command' under

a generalissimo would have again broken down. As to jeopardising the British Army in order to fall in with French theories or demands we shall find, when we reach the middle stage of the fighting in 1918, that not once but in two or three instances the British Government brought weight to bear on Haig not to do what Foch demanded. They happened to be wrong-headed cases of civilian interference; and Haig refused to support them. But they well illustrate the fact that Haig was expected not to yield to the Generalissimo if he considered the safety of his army might thereby be affected.

The appearance of the third large army, the American, on the scene and its development might of course have increased the difficulty of independent commands; the larger the number of allies the larger the inclination, presumably, towards a generalissimo. Though, on the other hand, the more powerful an ally becomes, the less is he inclined to accept dictation. In his final report Pershing says, 'As our troops were being trained for open warfare, there was every reason why we should not allow them to be scattered among our Allies even by divisions, much less as replacements, except by pressure of sheer necessity. Any sort of permanent amalgamation would irrevocably commit America's fortunes to the hands of the Allies.' That is not meant as an argument against a generalissimo—Pershing approved the March 1918 arrangement. But it is an argument against anything like dictation: *i.e.*, the powers of a generalissimo must be restricted.

At the Beauvais conference on April 3 the three Allied Governments, at the suggestion of Haig, defined the powers of the Generalissimo more exactly than had been done at Doullens. He was entrusted with 'The strategical direction of military operations. The Commanders-in-Chief of the British, French and American Armies will have full control of the tactical action of their respective armies. Each Commander-in-Chief will have the right of applying to his Government if in his opinion the army is endangered by any order received from General Foch.'

Such was the final form of 'unity of command.' The arrangement worked out on the whole well, thanks to the soldiers. It is not impertinent to ask whether some corresponding formula might not have been applied to the statesmen who arranged the peace terms. At Versailles, France, Great Britain, Italy and the United States started and ended with wholly independent and often jarring commands. The delicate subject of 'unity of command' was never even suggested, far less entered into. There was a president, of course—a conference connotes a president. But he was given no strategical direction over any of his Allies. Why? Was it because these four civilian commanders-in-chief were fully agreed as to the main principles of policy? Scarcely; for whereas one of them put, for instance, his League of Nations in the forefront, another made no secret of his coolness towards the League. So obvious was the divergence of aim over territorial settlements that one of the Entente statesmen left the Conference for a time. There was a clash of aims all through. No amount of complimentary speech and writing could conceal that. 'Unity of command' or a generalissimo for the statesmen's task would have been impracticable, we may be told. Yet no one, so far, has shown wherein precisely lies the distinction in regard to military and civilian operations, in this matter. One's strong impression is that if among allies 'unity of command' with a generalissimo is applicable to the field of war, it should be equally so to the hall of peace. If the great-minded soldier is ready to forget self, *amour-propre*, the great-minded statesman ought not to lag behind in this matter.

Yet who can quite imagine the Italian nation on one side, and the British nation—or at any rate its Prime Minister—on the other, themselves proposing to accept the directives of, say, M. Clémenceau?

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'Unity of command,' as it is termed, then, on the Western Front succeeded because the leaders of the two great armies

were fortunately assorted. The personal equation counts immensely in such a position. It was only once or twice necessary between March and November to refer a matter in dispute to the British Government: though, as we shall find in another chapter, that Government volunteered its intervention in another instance—an intervention which, if accepted by the British Commander-in-Chief, might have ultimately had some grave results on the Alliance, and have made 'unity of command' look foolish.

But, as pointed out above, it would be unwise to conclude from this success in 1918 that henceforth 'unity of command' in the sense of a generalissimo will invariably be adopted by allied forces. The principle and the pride of nationality, where the alliance includes two or three Powers who substantially are equals, may always make its application difficult. There is no escape from the fact that the Power which supplies the supreme leader in the field will, other military factors being fairly equal, feel she has the right, if victory falls to the alliance, to the most influential voice in the settlement. France, for instance, obtained that right; and would have some reason therefore to feel sore if British statesmen did not recognise it.

Perhaps that is one of the reasons why she has felt sore —and shown it.

But alliances between great Powers for military purposes cannot always be so close and heartfelt as in this instance. Nations on a sudden emergency may be forced for self-preservation to join against a common danger, though their connection with each other may not be of a particularly intimate character. Thus Italy, for sufficient reasons, joined the Entente in 1915, though she was in some degree allied at the time with the Central Powers. It cannot be taken for granted that, if Italy joined France again against a common enemy, she would place France over her army, or that France would adopt an Italian generalissimo—assuming, of course, that the two armies and the military resources generally were about equal, as, roughly, their populations are to-day. The Central Powers might possibly have fared better

if at the very start Austria had placed her forces at the disposal of Germany. Indeed her position as a lesser partner should have made that concession to unity of control comparatively easy. Yet apparently it took two years to achieve this completely ; and even then she seems to have had doubts as to the step being desirable. The pride of nationality and motives of self-interest do not entirely disappear even among allies struggling for life in a great war. They always have existed, and the Peace Treaties of 1919 with their territorial rearrangements based largely on nationality will not lessen these motives. They are likely on the whole to predispose combatants towards independent commands.

There has also, as already pointed out, to be borne in mind the difficult position in which the creation of a generalissimo must place the commander-in-chief of the other army. That position is far harder in these democratic times than it was a hundred years ago or less, owing to the dread which is felt by rulers at home in regard to casualties.

In the summer of 1918 the British Government was—though still, more or less, like the Prime Minister in 1917, calling for 'a knock-out blow'—as alarmed about casualties, about what the public would say or do if these ran high, as were French statesmen in the spring of 1917, and in 1918 too. Perhaps it feared the public would rise and sweep it from office if a heavy casualty list was announced in the summer of 1918 ; or it may have feared the public would force peace on us—as the French statesmen feared in 1917.[1]

[1] Mangin in *Comment finit la Guerre*, makes somewhat light of the French casualties on the Aisne in April 1917. As we have seen, they were exaggerated. But the democratic and political agitation over them was, not the less, a grave deterrent. Only uncommonly strong-willed governments dare turn a deaf ear to outcries about casualties in war. We had not such a government in 1917, nor had the French. In August 1917 the present writer was at the Carso front when the Italians were making an attempt to break the Austrian Army. He had noticed no wounded soldiers in the towns, and, making enquiries at Udine, found that the authorities discouraged the appearance of disabled men in public lest it should depress people at the base. Statesmen, naturally enough, are more than ever sensitive in this matter.

A member of the Administration early in 1918 said to the writer that if we continued losing men at the current rate we should have a strike of soldiers at Victoria Station one day! Whatever the reason, they dreaded casualties, and were ready to descend on the Commander-in-Chief if he incurred them—whether through his own initiative or through supporting Foch too loyally.

It may be uncommonly difficult in any mighty struggle in the future to find again a great soldier with anything like the character and intelligence of Sir Douglas Haig ready to take such a position as the British Commander-in-Chief's in 1918. If he does, he will want to feel certain that the government he serves means to play the game.

Now the British Government in 1918 did not play the game. The telegram to Haig on August 31, and at an earlier date their action in sending General Smuts across to France to 'get at him'—at the expense of Foch—are hardly examples of playing the game.

What is the authoritative military view in this matter of 'unity of command' with a generalissimo or independent commanders-in-chief working well together as, for instance, Joffre and Haig worked in 1916? By authoritative military view is meant the opinion of the men at our G.H.Q. who had to make a working proposition of the formulæ of March 26 and April 3. Probably it would be found on enquiry that they perceived and still perceive the advantages and disadvantages of the two alternatives to be about equally balanced. They would recognise that unless the two independent commanders-in-chief of the great armies in the field can reach agreement in all matters of supreme moment this method is likely to fail. It did not fail in 1916—though impatient critics were always, in their respective countries, assailing Joffre and assailing Haig.[1] But it failed between March 21 and 26, 1918, when the two Commanders-in-Chief differed strategically in a matter of the highest importance.

[1] That there was more real 'unity of command' in 1916 than in 1917 or 1918 is not a statement likely to be contradicted by the British Commander-in-Chief during that period.

Yet of course they recognise the great difficulties and dangers involved in the other plan, with the home Government always uneasy about casualties and anxious if the commander-in-chief seems yielding too much to an impetuous generalissimo. They will say that there is really no ideal solution of this problem in allied warfare where more than one great army is concerned.

But whatever the preference of individual soldiers at our headquarters in France may have been, as between the two systems, there was complete agreement in this—either was preferable to the ludicrous attempt to carry on war by a committee of soldiers and statesmen.

Lord Milner relates in the account of his tour referred to above that he spoke to the British Commander-in-Chief about the result of the Doullens Conference when he met him at his headquarters next day. The C.-in-C. replied, 'I can deal with a man, not with a committee.'

CHAPTER VIII

THE LYS

(By J. H. B.)

The suggestion has been made that the story of the German offensive on the Lys might be written under the title 'How Portugal Saved Europe,' the argument being that the rapid progress made by the enemy on April 9 led the German command to throw more troops into this battle than they had originally intended, and to transform it, in fact, from an important diversion, designed to draw British and French reserves from the main battle front on the Somme, into a major offensive with definite strategic objectives of its own.

It is an idea not without attraction, and viewed from the standpoint of the military situation as it appeared to the British in the spring and early summer of 1918 there were reasons to support it. For a long time after the enemy had been brought to a halt on the Somme, the Amiens front remained a source of constant grave anxiety. Once fresh British divisions had got into action, we had been able without much difficulty to hold up the leg-weary survivors of the German divisions originally committed to the great assault, and the wide expanse of twice devastated country over which the enemy had now to reconstruct his communications was some guarantee that we should be given a period of comparative quiescence on this front. On the other hand we were acutely conscious of the scantiness of the defences left to us at the end of the enemy's tremendous drive, and though new trench lines were being dug at high speed with all available labour and these new lines ultimately developed into very formidable systems of defence,

the digging of them took time and in any event the enemy had already advanced so far west that any further progress could not fail to have most serious results. The whole area of non-essential ground on this front had gone and we had no longer any scope for a rear-guard battle there. It seemed, therefore, that sooner or later, when the enemy had had time to open up adequate communications to support another large-scale attack, he would renew his offensive on this front where the strategic objectives offered him were so great and now so comparatively near at hand. If this view were a correct one, it was thought that it would not be good policy on his part to devote to secondary offensives elsewhere more troops than might be needed to keep the Allies in play and prevent their recuperation, to draw their reserves away from the decisive front and make it impossible for them to take advantage by a counter-offensive of the long southern flank created by the thrust towards Amiens. That this was the policy the enemy had intended to adopt seemed to be made probable by the fact that he consistently neglected to construct on the new front the elaborate defences we had grown accustomed to expect of him, confining himself on the contrary to strict essentials in the matter of defences and clinging with much determination to his bridgehead positions west of the Ancre and the Avre.

For some time, therefore, the more popular British view of the enemy's future intentions was that the closing down of the Somme battle would be followed by powerful but limited attacks well to either flank, in Flanders and on the Reims front, attacks which would force the Allies to disperse their concentration of reserves astride the Somme, lower the moral as well as the numerical strength of the Allied forces at a minimum cost in German lives, and give time both to prepare adequate communications and to rest and train troops for a final thrust along the valley of the Somme. As time went on circumstances led to a modification of this opinion, among them especially the enemy's marked and significant efforts to conserve the powerful block of reserves allotted to Prince Rupprecht's northern group of armies

and the obvious preparations for a renewal of the offensive in Flanders.

The belief that the Somme offensive would be followed by powerful strokes well to either flank was justified by events ; but the disclosure of the German designs contained in Ludendorff's book of *Memories* would seem to show that the ground plan of the enemy's strategy was not quite what it was at the time thought to be, and in particular that the Lys attack was intended from the first to be a large-scale offensive with objectives limited only by the Channel. The breaking of the Portuguese front accordingly assisted but did not change the German plans, and its influence upon the course of the war can no longer be held to justify the employment of the title above suggested. At the end of March Ludendorff would seem to have reconciled himself to the conclusion that the attainment of the full objective of March 21 was no longer possible, and to have set himself at once to carry out another plan, large indeed yet less ambitious. Though it might no longer be in his power to sever the British Army from the French, he could reckon on the fact that he had dealt that Army an almost crushing blow which had completely exhausted its reserves, and, as he thought, affected its moral. Certainly no German division at that period of the war, after going through experiences such as those met with by the 50th and 51st British Divisions, for example, on the Somme, could little more than a week after have put up so stout a resistance as those divisions made upon the Lys front. Ludendorff underestimated the staying powers of British troops. He could see that the Flanders line had been skinned to the bone and was held for the most part by divisions withdrawn from the Somme battle, some of them on much overstretched fronts. There were, indeed, no other troops to hold the line. The plan to which he turned, therefore, after the failure of the assault on Arras had shown him that the Somme offensive was destined to wear itself out as previous offensives had done, was to complete the destruction of the British Army by transforming the following up movement, which his

northern armies would have developed had the Arras attack succeeded, into an independent offensive with the Channel ports as its objective.

As already stated, the extreme probability that the point of danger would be shifted to the north as soon as battle fighting had ceased on the Somme was fully realised by the British Command. The probability of a German attack north of the La Bassée Canal, for which certain preparations appeared to have been carried out, had been brought to Sir Douglas Haig's notice prior to March 21. Indications that preparations for a hostile attack in this sector were nearing completion had been observed in the first days of April, but its extent and force could not be accurately gauged.[1]

The Portuguese front, though stiffened by British machine-gun and trench-mortar units and by the presence of many British instructors and liaison officers, had never been considered a strong one, and the German dispositions opposite to it had always been carefully watched. For a long time past, indeed, the German troops in this sector had been composed of tired or second-class divisions, and for more than two years it had been the only part of the line for which the British Command was responsible that could be described as reasonably quiet. When it became evident that in the near future its comparative peace was likely to be rudely disturbed, it was decided to replace the two Portuguese divisions with British troops. Both Portuguese divisions had been in line for a long time, and not even this part of our front was so quiescent that troops could remain in it indefinitely without feeling the need of relief. Moreover, the land was low-lying, and trying during the winter months for this reason if for no other. The relief of the Portuguese divisions, therefore, was a natural and proper precaution.

The first stage in this relief was completed on April 7, on which date the 2nd Portuguese Division took over the whole Corps front, comprising the Richebourg l'Avoué, Neuve Chapelle and Fauquissart sectors, with three brigades in line

[1] *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches*, Dent's edition, p. 218.

and one in reserve. Orders to take over the command of the 2nd Portuguese Division front had been issued by First Army Headquarters to the XIth Corps on April 5. The brigade of the 55th Division south of the La Bassée Canal having been relieved on the night of April 7-8 by an extension of the Ist Corps front northwards, it was arranged that on the night of the 9th-10th the right brigade of the 2nd Portuguese Division in the Richebourg l'Avoué sector should be relieved by a brigade of the 55th and that the front of the two other Portuguese brigades in line in the Neuve Chapelle and Fauquissart sectors should be taken over by the 50th Division which, with the 51st Division, had been rapidly refitted and sent up from the Somme for the purposes of this relief.

So much attention has been directed to the stretching of our divisions on the Fifth Army front prior to the greater offensive of March 21 that the even more critical state of affairs from this point of view, to which the initial shortage of effectives and subsequent battle casualties had reduced us, on the Lys front has been overlooked. Again it was a situation regarding which we had no choice. Forty-six out of our fifty-eight infantry divisions had already been engaged on the Somme, and, while those withdrawn from that tremendous struggle were being re-equipped and made up to strength so far as our reinforcements allowed, the line had still to be held somehow. North of the La Bassée Canal on April 9 it was held almost entirely by divisions lately withdrawn from the Somme, tired and under strength or with reinforcements which they had had no time properly to absorb, and over-extended on long fronts. If the enemy had given us time to carry out the relief of the Portuguese, our line between the La Bassée Canal and the Ypres Canal would have been held as follows : the 55th Division on a front of about 6000 yards with 3 brigades in line, the 50th Division on a front of about 8000 yards with 2 brigades in line, the 40th Division on a front of 8000 yards with 2 brigades in line, the 34th Division on a front of 8000 yards with 2 brigades in line, the 25th Division

with 2 brigades in line on a front of 6500 yards, and the 19th Division with 2 brigades in line on a front of 6500 yards. This gives an average of over 7150 yards to a division, as compared with the 6750 yards of the Fifth Army on March 21. Refitting, however, takes time and, in the event, the blow fell before our arrangements had been completed ; with the result that the unfortunate 2nd Portuguese Division was caught on a front of nearly 10,000 yards. Even with four brigades to a division this was more than Portuguese troops could be expected to hold against serious attack.

How far the result of the battle would have been modified had the enemy delayed his attack until British troops had taken over the line it is difficult to say. For a third time the enemy attacked in fog ; but the advantages to be gained from this circumstance were certainly less on the Lys than on the Somme, for the field of view in the flat Lys country prior to the battle was much limited even in clear weather by trees and hedges, and the ground itself was cut up by numerous dykes which in fog would tend to hinder and disorganise the attack. The key to the situation on this front was regarded both by the enemy and ourselves as the Givenchy sector, and here the 55th Division, the only fresh troops involved in the attack, was holding at the moment of assault a front of 4500 yards ; quite comparable, that is to say, with the Third Army average on March 21, and more than the front held by some of the Third Army divisions. By the evening of April 9 this front had grown, as the result of the early and complete withdrawal of the Portuguese from the battle, to a largely extemporised line of 11,000 yards or more, and this enormous front was successfully maintained. It is no great assumption, therefore, to consider this Division capable of holding an organised line of 6000 to 6500 yards. It seems reasonably clear that the troops of the 40th Division were able to contain the first attacks made on their own front ; but when the enemy turned northwards against them from the Portuguese area they were less successful in forming a defensive flank and were forced back until by the early afternoon two brigades were north

of the Lys, the third brigade being left with the 34th Division to form a flank facing south on a line north of Bois Grenier and Fleurbaix. The 34th Division was not attacked on its own front on the 9th, though its reserve brigade and the right of its flank brigade became heavily engaged in the endeavour to form a flank facing south, the front for which the 34th Division was chiefly responsible becoming extended in this way to some 15,000 yards. It maintained its positions successfully on the 10th until withdrawn under orders between 3 P.M. and midnight, executing a most difficult withdrawal, when the time came, in a most admirable and gallant manner. The reconstituted 50th Division fought for four days with a stubbornness worthy of its behaviour south of the Somme. It is not too much to assume, therefore, that if the whole line on April 9 had been held by British troops the enemy would not have crossed the Lys, at any rate on this day. There was the 51st, another hard-fighting division, close at hand and other reserves not far off, so that it is quite possible that had the line of the Lys held on the first day the enemy would never have succeeded in crossing it.

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The German effort on the Lys, though made on a much more restricted front than the March offensive—the initial assault on the 9th was delivered on a front of 11 miles, extended to 24 miles on the 10th—was none the less a very powerful one and displayed the same feature of great concentration of force on the point selected for the break-through that had characterised the enemy's assaults on March 21 and 28. Between the La Bassée Canal and Bois Grenier, fourteen German divisions in line and close reserve took part in the opening attack. The general scheme resembled that of March 21 in that there were two areas selected for attack, separated by a central sector to be 'pinched' from south and north. To Armentières, which on April 7 had been drenched with 30,000 to 40,000 gas shells, was assigned the rôle of the Cambrai salient. As a variant on the March plan, the northern assault was

the less powerful and was postponed for twenty-four hours, the idea being no doubt that reserves on that front might be drawn into the southern battle. This actually happened, the reserve brigade of the 25th Division being engaged on April 9 at Croix-du-Bac, while two brigades of the 29th Division and one of the 49th had been moved down from north to south of Armentières by the early morning of April 10. On this day the second German thrust was delivered by five divisions on a front of about four miles north of Deulement, a sixth division continuing the active front as far as the Ypres Canal.

The total German force brought together for the two attacks of April 9 and 10 appears to have been 27 divisions, of which 21 were in line or close reserve. By the end of the first week in May the battle had been reinforced by a further 22 German divisions, making for this offensive a total of 49, of which 40 were fresh divisions.

The German commanders had already shown themselves masters of the art of packing divisions into small areas and launching them simultaneously to the attack. Timing must have been admirable, and in this instance, too, they were aided by being able to work under cover of a town, indeed of a great city, Lille. As might be expected, the impact of 14 German divisions on a front of 11 miles held by 3 Allied divisions led to events moving very rapidly from the first. It had taken more than 36 hours to effect a definite break in the British line on the Somme. On the Lys a similar result was effected in less than three hours. Within that period, with the exception of certain field batteries that did good service and a few small bodies of Portuguese infantry collected under British officers with British units, the Portuguese Corps had withdrawn from the battle and from active part in the war. On their 10,000 yards of front were seven German divisions, and our Portuguese allies could not be expected to stand against such an assault. There arises an obvious criticism that the 55th Division ought to have held a longer front in relief of the Portuguese, but had they done so there is no reasonable room for doubt that the

Portuguese front would still have been broken. In that case the 55th Division, had it been extended at the commencement of the battle over a 7000 or 8000 yard sector of the front line, could hardly have formed a secure flank to the break and kept Givenchy Hill. Their fate would have been that of the 40th Division, and the Germans would have broken down with equal ease both shoulders of the defence.

Other measures had been taken. The danger that the Portuguese front would represent during the interval between the commencement and completion of the relief of the Portuguese Corps was not difficult to understand, and the XIth and XVth Corps had arranged that in case of attack upon the Portuguese the line of defence which ran behind them from Le Touret through Huits Maisons and Bout Deville to Laventie (the Village Line) should be occupied by such reserves as the two Corps could muster, in order to prevent the creation of a gap should the Portuguese front be broken. The troops available on the XIth Corps front were the 51st Division in the Robecq area and the 1st King Edward's Horse and the XIth Corps Cyclist Battalion near Hinges. The XVth Corps had the 50th Division, which was due to go into line on the night of the 9th-10th and would then have passed to the XIth Corps, collected at and north of Estaires.

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The German bombardment opened soon after 4 A.M. and was so severe that at 4.50 A.M. the XIth Corps issued orders to their mounted troops and to the 152nd Brigade, 51st Division, to occupy their sector of the Village Line. The 55th Division had already ordered its reserve brigade to man battle posts. An hour later, the XVth Corps ordered the 151st Brigade, 50th Division, to occupy the rest of the Village Line and the crossings of the Lawe and Lys rivers. At 6.30 A.M. the reserve brigade, 120th, of the 40th Division was ordered to fill in the gap between the 151st Brigade and the right of the 40th Division in line. The remaining Brigades of the 51st and 50th Divisions were also ordered to move forward to positions of readiness. This was in accordance with the agreed defence scheme of the British

Corps, but the rapidity of the German advance through the Portuguese sector completely upset our calculations. Our reserves had not sufficient time to get into position, and were further hindered as they were moving up by encountering large numbers of hurriedly retreating Portuguese. The XIth Corps mounted troops reached their positions in the Village Line and held them against attacks which commenced between 11.30 A.M. and noon, by which time the bulk of the Portuguese were west of the river; but the 120th Brigade did not succeed in getting into its assigned position, and the enemy, pushing in round the right of the 119th Brigade in line and the left of the 151st Brigade which was now deployed between Laventie and the left of the XIth Corps troops, commenced to press back both the 120th and the 119th Brigades towards the Lys. This was at or before 9 A.M., about two hours, that is to say, after the infantry attack on the Portuguese front is believed to have commenced.

Our inability to complete the defence scheme on the XVth Corps front rapidly became the decisive factor in that sector of the battle, while the successful defence of the 55th Division at Givenchy governed the course of events on the southern front of the attack. Had the 55th Division given way Bethune must have fallen, the 51st Division, then coming into action on the line of the Lawe river, would have been put in a position of the greatest danger, and the enemy, pressing on westwards and south-westwards in the direction of Lillers and France's last remaining northern coal-field, would have imperilled the centre of the whole British line. The enemy's failure to capture Givenchy and Festubert cramped the development of the Lys offensive in much the same way that his failure before Arras fatally restricted the development of the greater offensive on the Somme. More than any other single incident in the battle, it contributed to the ultimate break-down of his plan.

It is interesting to study the 55th Division's defensive arrangements. The Division had been moved to the sector from the Cambrai front where on a misty November morning

its northern brigade, extended over a wide front, had unsuccessfully attempted to contain by means of the elastic system of defence in depth the new German system of attack. Its conduct in that battle had been the subject of unkind and entirely inaccurate comment. The Germans themselves had accepted the popular version of the Cambrai incident, and had labelled the 55th a second-class division. All ranks must have felt that they were undeservedly under a cloud, and that their reputation had been called in question. Had the German Command been better judges of British character, they might have realised that the 55th Division was likely to be in a thoroughly dangerous temper. They had a very difficult as well as a most important sector to hold. Givenchy Hill, the key to the British defences astride the canal, lay within 500 yards of the front line. It could be smothered in a hail of shells and bombs at any moment. None the less, at a meeting of the XIth Corps Commander and the Divisional and Brigade Commanders of the 55th Division on March 25, it had been decided that it was impossible to fight in depth as well as in width. A line of resistance had consequently been chosen the whole of the southern portion of which lay within 500 yards or less of the front line and no part of which was more than 1800 yards from the foremost trench. This meant that the main line of defence, the 'battle zone,' was exposed from the commencement of the offensive to the full fury of the enemy's bombardment.

Fortunately it was a front that had long been held by us and was well provided with shelter. The defence of Givenchy by the 55th Division and the defence of Gommecourt by the Germans in July 1916 present many points of resemblance. It is indeed curious to find so close a parallel between two successful defences so widely separated in point of time and with so many changes and developments both in methods and resources spread over the period between them. The success of the German defence at Gommecourt was due mainly to the high degree of training of the defending troops and their intimate knowledge of a

maze of intricate defences. Secure during the bombardment in deep dugouts with many openings, the garrison of Gommecourt had been trained to man their defences with great quickness immediately the bombardment lifted, and once it came to hand-to-hand fighting in the trenches their superior local knowledge was of decisive advantage. The story of the 55th Division at Givenchy was very similar. A network of intercommunicating tunnels gave protection during the German bombardment and enabled our troops to emerge at the right moment. The whole defence had been rehearsed and practised repeatedly in detail in tactical exercises. All the infantry in line were told off definitely to one of two tasks, either as garrisons whose duty was to hold their posts to the last no matter whether outflanked or surrounded, or as troops for immediate local counter-attack. Every man knew where he had to go and what he had to do. The result was that at the end of the first day's fighting the right brigade of the Division held the whole of their line intact, while the left brigade held the whole of their line of resistance and in addition had spared troops to form a defensive flank 2000 yards in length. Neither on this day nor in the days that followed could the attacking German divisions make further headway in this vital sector. Though by the time the relief of the Division was completed on the night of April 16 the 55th had lost over 3000 officers and men in killed, wounded and missing, they had themselves taken over 900 prisoners and by holding up the southern shoulder of the attack had definitely made possible a successful outcome to the whole defensive battle.

Our Army was indeed fortunate in the success of the 55th Division's defence, for the gap on the XVth Corps front could not be closed effectively. The enemy showed the greatest energy and by 11 A.M. or soon after had reached the Lys at Bac St. Maur. Two hours later the 120th and 119th Brigades were both north of the river and, despite their efforts to hold the river line, under cover of machine guns mounted in the upper stories of houses the enemy succeeded at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon in reaching the northern

bank. Troops of one of their support divisions, the 11th Reserve Division, had already come into the fight and were identified the same evening as far north as Croix-du-Bac. Here the reserve brigade of the 25th Division met and checked the enemy temporarily, but he was in too great strength to be held for long.

The effect of this rapid advance through the Portuguese sector had been largely to lengthen the fighting front. This gave room for the deployment of the closely packed German divisions, but at the same time stretched to breaking-point the British units confronting them. The 16-mile front between the La Bassée Canal and Frélinghien, held on the morning of April 9 by 3 British divisions and 1 Portuguese division, by the evening of that day had become a front of 25 miles held by 5 British divisions and 1 additional brigade against 16 German divisions. One of the results of the extension of the battle front to the north on April 10, when the enemy launched his powerful thrust along the valley of the Douve, and of the skilful evacuation of the Armentières salient consequent upon the new thrust, was to reduce the proportion borne by the total length of the battle front to the number of British divisions engaged. On the night of April 10 we had troops of 8 divisions on a front of 30 miles ; but whatever relief was obtained in this way was more than counterbalanced by the additional weight given to the German attack. Further, if the withdrawal from Armentières shortened the northern portion of our battle line, the overstretching of the troops south of the Armentières–Bailleul railway became steadily more dangerous. Some 19 miles in length on the evening of April 11, our line in this sector alone had increased to some 24 miles by the night of the 12th.

These four days sufficed to bring about the crisis of the battle on the southern front. On the evening of the 13th the area of greatest danger began to shift to the north, and from April 14 onwards the only changes in our line south of Merris were in our favour. North of Meteren the situation continued to give rise to acute anxiety until April 16,

on which date our front began to stabilise on a line running from Meteren north of Bailleul to Wytschaete and the line of the Wytschaete–Westhoek ridge. We had already withdrawn from Passchendaele. French troops were arriving behind the Second Army battle front, and when on the 17th a powerful attack on Kemmel Hill, in which 8 German divisions took part—7 of them fresh and with the famous Alpine Corps in close support to exploit success—was beaten off with heavy loss to the enemy, it looked as though the crisis of the whole battle was over. On the 18th a final German effort to set the southern front from Givenchy to Merville once more in motion also failed disastrously. For a week after this there was no fighting of more than local character on the Lys front.

It is impossible to avoid being struck by the sort of inverted parallel that can be drawn between the course of events in this second German effort and that followed in the mightier assault on the Somme. In both cases the battle developed unequally, so that the fighting falls into two well-marked phases corresponding with the northern and the southern portions of the general battle front. In both cases events opposite the main centre of the German concentration march rapidly to a crisis, while on the remainder of the battle front the struggle is long drawn out and it is several days before the time of greatest danger comes. In both cases the defence is saved in the first place by the obstinate resistance of one shoulder of the British line attacked, and in the second by the desperate step-by-step defence of weary and much intermingled British units who hang on though grievously outnumbered in the hope that French assistance will at length arrive. In both cases French assistance is late in arriving, and the taking over of line by our Allies is signalised by a renewal of the German advance on the front they have taken over. Only, the scheme of the battle is inverted, and on the Lys it is the southern instead of the northern portion where the crisis comes first and is soonest over.

The two battles are brought more closely into parallel,

and the general policy of the British defence more clearly understood, when it is realised that in both cases alike the strength and success of the British defence is greater the nearer the assault approaches the centre of the British line in France. In the March battle we had behind the right of our line the wide expanse of devastated country which could be given up if need be. There was nothing that really corresponded with this on the left of our line in Flanders, and moreover for political reasons it was not desirable that we should lose what little was left to us of Belgium. Yet, though there was nothing in the north to compare with the 25-miles belt of devastated country west of St. Quentin, there was in the north, if military considerations only were taken into account, the terrible morass of the Ypres battle-field which we could put, if need be, between ourselves and the enemy. Behind that there was a succession of more or less completely prepared defensive lines, in which inundations figured largely and effectively, radiating like the ribs of a fan from a common centre in the neighbourhood of Hazebrouck and the Nieppe Forest. However undesirable it might be to give up Ypres and the last free soil of Belgium, it could be done if need be without military disaster. The greatest depth of the German advance on the Lys was some 10 or 11 miles, as compared with 41 miles on the St. Quentin front. It was sufficient to endanger our hold on the Mont-des-Cats–Kemmel heights, and to bring our defence close up to the nodal point represented by the Nieppe Forest and Hazebrouck. Those 10 or 11 miles, however, gained at any point from the Arras sector to the La Bassée Canal, would have had results far more serious than flowed from the loss of Armentières, Bailleul and Kemmel. It would have given the enemy not only Vimy Ridge but the whole of the Lorette heights, would have brought him to Pas, Aubigny or Houdain within easy range of Doullens and St. Pol through which ran important lateral communications, and would have entailed the loss of the last of the northern French coal-fields. When, therefore, it became necessary to skin the rest of our line to feed the Somme battle, the

northern portion of our front suffered most ; and when it became evident that a northern offensive was intended, the necessity of holding firm in the centre of our line in France could not for a moment be overlooked. To have attempted to hold our entire front in equal force would have been to court disaster in view of the general insufficiency of our numerical strength. It was necessary to make sure of essentials.

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The course of the involved battle-fighting that led to the two successive periods of crisis, and the final incident when the battle suddenly blazed up again on April 25 and Kemmel Hill was lost, must be described very briefly. Before doing so it is worth while to point out that this battle, which brought the sorely tried British Army to its lowest ebb in the whole war, reduced to absurdity the theories of those who, throughout the later stages of the war at any rate, clamoured for permanent corps ; asked, that is, that each division in the Army might definitely be allotted to a particular corps and trained and fought always with that corps.

The advantages of such a method of using troops, if it can be followed, are obvious enough. In war it is axiomatic that the first duty of an officer is to know his men, and the rule has no less force when applied to the interrelations of the various grades of officers and staffs. A corps spirit can be as valuable a moral asset as a divisional or battalion spirit ; while it is of incalculable advantage to a corps commander and his staff to have personal knowledge of the qualities and capacities both of officers and men of the divisions allotted to him. Moreover, units of whatever size that have trained together fight together better and more effectively than units that are thrown together, perhaps for the first time, on the field of battle. It is the same in war as in games, the team that has worked together previously starts with a big advantage.

For political reasons, the Canadian and Australian troops were kept and fought as permanent corps on almost all occasions, and without question the military value of these

corps was markedly increased by that fact.[1] So far as possible certain other divisions were kept in the same corps as much as practicable, corps commanders of outstanding ability and force of character getting a natural preference in this matter. No one quarrelled with the principle of permanent corps, but the practice of it, in a comparatively small army that was always fighting and frequently overstretched, gave rise to insuperable difficulties. As soon as the resources of the Army became at all strained, whether in attack or defence, it was found that we had not a sufficient reserve of divisions to treat corps as our fighting units. The different divisions employed in an attacking corps rarely became exhausted to equal degree in the same space of time, and to pull a corps out because two of its divisions were fought out while the third was still fit for further service required a greater reserve of force than we at any time enjoyed. Inevitably, the comparatively fresh division had to go to another corps ; or the tired divisions were transferred to a corps holding a more quiet front and the fighting corps filled up with fresh and strange divisions. The fact that the Canadian and Australian divisions were definitely allotted to their own special corps made the endeavour to keep British divisions together in permanent corps the more hopeless.

The French were peculiarly wedded to the theory of the permanent corps, and sought to realise their ideal by employing mixed corps, some consisting of three divisions,

[1] Some interesting figures were published at the end of 1918 regarding the use of Dominion and Home troops during the period March 21 to October 24, 1918. They show that the percentage of casualties to strength among infantry for United Kingdom, Canadian and Australian troops was respectively—

	Officers.	Other Ranks.
United Kingdom Divisions .	118 per cent.	121 per cent.
Canadian Divisions . .	97 ,,	84 ,,
Australian Divisions . .	83 ,,	85 ,,

In horse and field artillery, the United Kingdom provided 85·88 per cent. of our total strength and 86·38 per cent. of our total casualties.

The average number of days out of the line was—

39 United Kingdom Divisions . .	69 days out of the line.
5 Australian Divisions . . .	79 ,, ,,
4 Canadian Divisions . . .	102 ,, ,,

others of two and yet others of only one division. Even this scheme broke down when the French Army was really in a tight place, although the French had 100 divisions or thereabouts to our 60, and had in the last half of the war longer intervals of quiet between less prolonged periods of battle-fighting. On the Lys in April 1918 the British Army drew nearer complete exhaustion than at any other period of the war with the possible exception of the autumn of 1914, and the result was the same as it had been in that earlier fighting. Not only did the permanent corps principle break down—even units of the Australian Corps had to fight on widely separated battle fronts—but the division and ultimately the brigade proved units too large to be kept together. We have seen that on April 9 the 25th Division parted with its reserve brigade, which went to fight not only with a different division but in a different corps. As the battle developed and our reserves grew fewer, action of this kind became more and more common. On April 14 the 34th Division was fighting with units of the 49th, 25th and 29th Divisions in addition to its own, the 25th Division included units of the 33rd and 49th Divisions, and the 19th Division units of the 36th and 59th. On April 17 the 9th Division front was held by units drawn from four different divisions, two of the divisions being represented by battalions fighting independently. The same phenomenon had been seen in the March battle, though in a less pronounced degree. The permanent corps remains an ideal that only overwhelming superiority of force will ever enable an army to realise completely.

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Meanwhile, the first result of the German irruption and consequent extension of our front was that on April 10 the 51st and 50th Divisions between the Pont Tournant on the Lawe opposite Locon and Sailly-sur-la-Lys were together responsible for a front of over eleven miles (some 20,000 yards) with seven or more German divisions opposed to them. The difficulties of the 50th Division were increased by the progress made by the enemy on the left bank of the Lys

near Bac St. Maur, where he pressed continually northwards till he had gained Steenwerck. His advance here turned the flank of the 50th Division on the Lys, and during the day the left brigade of the Division was gradually forced back westwards away from the river. That in such circumstances these two Divisions were able substantially to hold the enemy in check along the river line throughout April 10—as it can be seen from the map that they did [1]—was a wonderful feat of arms. It was the second factor which, joined with the successful defence of the 55th Division, saved the situation on the southern portion of the battle front.

The British Command was straining every nerve to bring reinforcements to the new battle, and every hour was of importance. One brigade of the 3rd Division had already come to the assistance of the 55th Division and the rest of the Division was following. The 29th Division was arriving in the Neuf Berquin area, and the 4th, 5th, 31st, 33rd, 61st, and 1st Australian Divisions were all under orders for or on their way to the southern battle sector. As we have seen, a brigade of the 25th Division had joined in the battle on the evening of the 9th, and two brigades of the 49th Division had also been ordered south from the IXth to the XIth Corps. The two brigades of the 49th, however, and other reinforcements that might have been available from the Ypres area were now drawn into the northern sector of the battle by the new attack astride the Douve valley.

Two divisions on so wide a front could not be expected to withstand indefinitely the heavy pressure which the enemy—no doubt fully realising the importance of that centre to the whole series of our northern defence systems—was exerting in the direction of Hazebrouck. In the course of April 11 both the 51st and the 50th Divisions were pressed back steadily westwards, and though on this day first two brigades of the 29th Division and then two brigades of the 31st Division came into action on their left, these additional troops were not enough to cover adequately the still extending battle line, or to stem the tide of the attack. Both the

[1] Map. No. 7 in Portfolio to Dent's edition of Haig's *Despatches*.

51st and the 50th Divisions had lost terribly in their heroic defence of the river line and of Estaires, the 29th Division troops had already suffered severely, while the 31st Division troops were needed to take over the line of the remnants of the 119th and 120th Brigades, 40th Division.

By the evening of the 11th the enemy had entered Merville, and there were still many anxious hours to run before we could hope to stabilise our line. In the St. Venant sector, indeed, the 61st Division was just getting into position in support along the line of the Clarence river and, with the 3rd Division in position in the Hinges sector and the 4th Division arriving, the situation south of Merville was beginning to wear a slightly better aspect. At Merville and to the north substantial reinforcements were still some distance from the fighting line. The 4th Guards Brigade, 31st Division, was moving down to strengthen the line east of Nieppe Forest, but it would take another twenty-four hours to get the 5th Division into line west of Merville, while the 1st Australian Division had scarcely started detraining at Hazebrouck.

Could we hold our line until the new divisions got into position? That was the problem of April 12, the most critical day in the first stage of the Lys battle. The answer was given in part by a break-down in German discipline, in part by the splendid obstinacy of the remnants of our battle-worn divisions, but yet more by the superb self-sacrifice of the 4th Guards Brigade.

One last moment of acute danger in the Bethune-St. Venant sector occurred shortly before dawn, when the enemy broke through at Riez-du-Vinage, capturing the commander and staff of the 153rd Infantry Brigade and reaching and even crossing the Aire–La Bassée canal. The situation was saved by the gallantry and resource of Major T. Davidson and Major F. C. Jack of the 51st Divisional Artillery, each of whom dropped the last gun of his retiring battery into action within 500 yards of the canal and, assisted by a party of gunners armed with rifles under Major Fairlie, drove back the Germans who had crossed and held the line

of the canal until help came. The enemy's most dangerous thrust, however, on this day was on the front from Merville to Bailleul, with Hazebrouck as his objective. At Merville and immediately to the north of it we had only a composite battalion of the XVth Corps—formed of every reasonably fit man that the corps staff had been able to rake together from schools and details—and what was left of the 50th Division, now reduced to a strength equivalent to one weak brigade and dog-tired. It was here that the enemy missed his opportunity. Merville until two days previously had been a prosperous and busy town. Its cellars were full, and unfortunately a number of its inhabitants had postponed departure until too late. All through the night of the 11th-12th our soldiers holding the line of the little stream just west of Merville could hear the shouts of drunken German soldiery in the town and the cries of the unfortunate inhabitants who had failed to get clear in time. Our own men, disorganised and exhausted and with a line so thin that nowhere could they have hoped to offer serious resistance to an assault by heavy masses, could do nothing to save the wretched townspeople. Yet the German outburst brought its own retribution quickly in its train. On the morning of the 12th his troops at Merville were no longer in a condition to deliver the vigorous attacks that might have broken through our enfeebled line. That evening the 5th Division, fresh from Italy, arrived and took over that portion of our front. Thereafter all the enemy's efforts to make further progress in this sector were in vain.[1]

[1] The arrival of the 5th Division afforded another example of the immediate effect produced by the intervention of fresh British troops in the later stages of a German attack. They were the second fresh division to enter the battle, if the 29th Division which was brought in on the 10th straight from the line at Passchendaele and after two nights without rest can be considered 'fresh.' When the 1st Australians came into line the effect was the same, and one cannot help being struck by the difference in the result when the fresh divisions were French. The 5th had very heavy fighting, on the 13th in particular, but never looked like giving ground. At the time, they did not get their fair share of credit with the public; because, being but lately arrived from Italy, it was not desired to advertise their presence. It is probably for the same reason that the division is not named in the text of the despatch, which, it must be

Meanwhile there had commenced in the Nieppe Forest sector perhaps the most brilliant exploit of the battle. The 4th Guards Brigade, 31st Division,[1] had begun debussing at Strazeele at 9 P.M. on the night of the 11th-12th and moved with scarce an interval into the battle, taking up position just before dawn on a line extending from l'Epinette to the Estaires-Strazeele road with the Coldstream and Grenadiers in line and the Irish Guards in reserve. Their duty was to cover the detraining of the 1st Australian Division, which had commenced entraining at Amiens on the afternoon of the 11th and was due to arrive in the Hazebrouck area on the night of the 12th-13th. The enemy opened a heavy fire with field guns and machine guns as soon as it was light and at 8 A.M. commenced to attack. This attack was repulsed, and at 11 A.M. the two battalions in line with two companies of the Irish Guards in echelon behind their right flank themselves attacked in turn—ten companies against an army—and made progress in the face of intense machine-gun and artillery fire, some of the enemy's guns firing over open sights at a distance of 300 yards.

At 3 P.M., however, both flanks were in the air, and the position of the Brigade, now holding a front of over 3000 yards, became critical. The enemy made strenuous efforts to outflank the right of the Coldstream and succeeded in penetrating between their right and centre companies, to be driven back by an immediate counter-attack carried out without orders by a company of Irish Guards. At 4.20 P.M. the enemy again attacked after intense artillery preparation and was once more repulsed with severe losses. Fighting throughout the day was of the severest description, the Grenadiers alone losing 8 officers and 250 men, while the battalion fired 70,000 rounds of small-arm ammunition and

remembered, was written and sent home some months before it was published in the *Gazette*.

[1] When divisions were reduced from a 13 to a 10 battalion basis the Guards Division gave up 3 battalions, the 3rd Coldstream, 4th Grenadiers and 2nd Irish Guards which were formed into a 4th Brigade and attached to the 31st Division, which had been compelled to break up one of its brigades as a result of the fighting south of Arras.

all its rifle grenades. But the enemy was held and that night the Australians were due to arrive.

Dawn of April 13 found the brigade on a front of some 4000 yards from just north of Les Puresbecques to just south of La Couronne. The trains bringing the Australian Division were several hours late, and, though battalions were hurried forward as they came, it was not till 5 A.M. on this morning that the first Australian brigade to arrive completed its detraining. The crisis was not yet over.

There was a dense fog during the early morning and the enemy made good use of it by working up machine guns to within short distances of our line. The attack began at about 6.30 A.M., at which hour the enemy drove an armoured car up the road from Les Puresbecques to within ten yards of our post there. Even so supported the attack was repulsed, and another strong assault which developed along the whole front of the brigade at 9.15 A.M. shared the same fate. In this attack all the men save one of the left post of the centre company of the Coldstream became casualties. The one unwounded survivor, Private Jacotin, held back the enemy single-handed for twenty minutes, till he was killed by a hand grenade.

Meanwhile farther north the enemy had entered Vieux Berquin and, after two unsuccessful attacks on the left of the Grenadiers, he brought up field-guns to point-blank range and flattened out the trenches in this part of the line. Gradually he worked round the left flank of the brigade, and at 3 P.M. had surrounded the Grenadiers' left company under Captain Pryce, the survivors of the company standing back to back in their trenches shooting both ways. A company of the Irish Guards was sent to their relief, but this company met large bodies of the enemy coming up on both flanks and was also surrounded. Though it could not save the Grenadiers, it delayed the enemy's advance; but at terrible cost, for only one N.C.O. and six men succeeded—during the night—in rejoining their battalion.

On the night of April 14-15 a corporal of Captain Pryce's company, who owed his life to the accident of falling into a

ditch, escaped from Vieux Berquin and got back to our lines. He told a stirring story. The company held on till 6.15 P.M. on the 13th, by which time they were a mile within the German lines. The company was then 18 strong and a party of the enemy was advancing within 80 yards of its trenches. At Captain Pryce's orders, the 18 men charged with the bayonet and the Germans, who could not fire because of other German troops in rear of ours, were driven off. Captain Pryce led his men back to their position and there waited till once more the enemy had worked up to within charging distance. He then charged again with the 14 men left to him, and from the ditch that stopped him the corporal saw the little band fighting heroically to the end.

By this time the centre company of the Grenadiers had six men left unwounded, and the right company twenty. All the officers were casualties ; yet at 6.15 P.M. the survivors were still fighting, and the few odd men who got back to the Australian lines that night stayed with the Australians and went on fighting for another twenty-four hours. Meanwhile the right company of the Coldstream had held on though surrounded until reduced to a mere handful, when those that were left fought their way back to the Australian and 5th Division lines. There were a few survivors also of the centre company.

The total casualties of the brigade in this two days' fighting were 30 officers and 1244 other ranks ; but the brigade had achieved its task. It had enabled the 1st Australian Division to get into position. Though the enemy continued his attacks on the 14th his assaults had lost their drive and the fresh troops of the 5th and 1st Australian Divisions held him without difficulty. The way to Hazebrouck was barred and the first phase of the battle was over.[1]

The performance of the Guards Brigade on these days

[1] What was left of the 4th Guards Brigade remained in action throughout April 14, holding a mile of our line until relieved on the night of the 14th-15th. Not a single straggler of this brigade came to the notice of the M.P.

stands out as an exploit of peculiar brilliance, an example to the British Army for all time ; but it would be unfair to other gallant regiments to forget their share in this glorious defence. It was on April 12 that Sir Douglas Haig issued his famous Order of the Day. It was an exhortation such as a soldier reserves for the supreme effort ; but even more than an exhortation to the Army, it was an expression of the spirit of the Army and an exhortation to the nation at home. While on Saturday, April 13, a startled nation was reading that appeal in their daily papers, the 4th Guards Brigade and with them the rest of the 31st Division and the remnants of the 29th were giving the Army's answer. The same day that the Order was published at home, the first and greatest crisis of the battle had passed.

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Throughout this period just described the main violence of the enemy's attack was gradually rolling north. The steady building up of our defence westwards and north-westwards from the original breakwater at Givenchy had imposed direction upon the tide of the German onrush. Swirling northwards on April 12 from the unbroken barrier presented by the Guards Brigade east of Nieppe Forest, it had dashed violently against the troops of the 29th and 31st Divisions thrust forward south of Merris and Meteren and had pushed them back north-westwards. The movement opened a gap on the left of the 31st Division south-west of Bailleul. Though this gap was closed during the early part of the night by the 19th Brigade of the 33rd Division [1] and a mixed force from the XXIInd Corps reinforcement camp, the enemy continued to press in this sector and by the 14th had gained Merris and was close up to the south of Meteren and Bailleul.

[1] The 19th Brigade again demonstrated the ability of fresh British troops to hold the enemy. On the 13th three attempts in force to break through their line were repulsed at all points with very heavy casualties. They were equally successful on the 14th. An interesting point is that in this fighting several detachments of German mounted troops were seen. One body about 200 strong gave our machine gunners a good target and few of the detachment escaped.

From this date onwards, except for a final unsuccessful effort with six divisions to carry the La Bassée Canal line on April 18, Meteren, which had now become the southern limit of the IXth Corps, was also approximately the southern limit of serious battle-fighting.[1] After the failure of his final attack on the Givenchy–Merville front on the 18th, the enemy appears to have abandoned his hope of reaching Hazebrouck and so turning the whole of the British northern defence systems, and to have concentrated upon the less ambitious objective of carrying the Kemmel–Mont-des-Cats heights by converging attacks from the positions he had now gained south and east of the high ground. The capture of the hills was essential for the comfort of his own troops in the Lys valley, and would have the further result of compelling us to abandon Ypres.

The course of the battle north of the Armentières-Bailleul railway, so long as the thrust towards Hazebrouck had been the main object of the enemy's endeavour, was naturally subordinated to that principal objective. The evacuation of Armentières had been followed by a gradual withdrawal of the British line day by day, until by the evening of the 14th the salient caused by the enemy's progress on the southern front had practically been extinguished.[2] This retreat had been accompanied by heavy fighting in which British divisions but lately withdrawn from the March battle had been subjected to concentric attacks by greatly superior forces. So long, however, as the enemy continued to push forward farther south, a step-by-step

[1] There had been a number of changes in dispositions since the opening of the battle. On April 11 the XIth Corps had assumed responsibility for the front south of the Lys, the Ist Corps relieving their right by taking over to beyond Locon on April 12. Next day, on which Lieut.-General Sir H. de B. de Lisle had taken over command of the XVth Corps, the 34th Division and attached brigades on the Meteren–Bailleul front were transferred to the IXth Corps and the front for which the XVth Corps was responsible was further shortened by the extension of the XIth Corps left northwards as far as a point opposite Neuf Berquin. On the same day the XVth Corps passed to the Second Army.

[2] This is shown very clearly in Map No 7 to Dent's edition of Haig's *Despatches*.

retreat in the Nieppe–Messines sector was dictated by that circumstance. It had the double advantage of straightening our line and concentrating our forces.

When, therefore, after April 14 the interest and anxiety of the Lys battle definitely shifted to the northern front, our line there ran comparatively straight from south of Bailleul to Wytschaete and the canal near Hollebeke. We had lost Messines and Neuve Eglise ; but our position was a strong one, with all the advantages of ground in our favour. There was already a feeling that the worst of the battle was over. Haig's Order of the Day had said that the French Army was moving rapidly and in great force to our support. Though against this were to be set the weariness of our own troops, their scanty numbers and the intermingling of units, the first violence of the attack had passed and with French help near at hand the end of the battle seemed to be in sight.

In view of possible eventualities, the IXth Corps had commenced on April 11 to prepare reserve defences on the general line Meteren–Dranoutre–Kemmel, and had taken the necessary steps to enable an orderly withdrawal to be made to these positions. Meanwhile, following the heavy fighting of April 13 and 14 on the Bailleul–Neuve Eglise front, it was decided to relieve the 34th Division at Bailleul by two brigades of the 59th Division. This relief was completed during the morning of the 15th, and the 34th Division moved into and occupied the prepared line of defence north of the town. The 59th Division had held the Bullecourt sector on March 21, and after suffering heavily in that attack had held the Zonnebeke sector of the Ypres salient until pulled out on April 12 (in anticipation of the first stage of our withdrawal on that front), and moved down to the IXth Corps.

From prisoners' statements it appeared certain that the enemy would make an attempt to take Bailleul on the 15th, and shortly before 6 P.M. the expected attack came. The assault was made by three fresh German divisions, among them the Alpine Corps, and fell almost exclusively on the two brigades of the 59th Division holding a front of about

three and a half miles south and east of Bailleul. By 7 P.M. the enemy had captured Ravelsberg Hill and, advancing westwards from this point of vantage, entered Bailleul at about 9 P.M. The tremendous attack they had sustained had shaken the 59th Division troops, but the foresight which had prepared the reserve line of defence north of Bailleul and manned it with the 34th Division was now justified. The survivors of the 59th Division were withdrawn through the new position and the enemy's success was limited to the capture of the hill and town. It left the IXth Corps holding a line that ran almost straight from Meteren to Wytschaete along the lower slopes of the Kemmel range of hills.

This line was maintained without material change until the morning of April 25, but not without a violent effort by the enemy to overthrow it. After local attacks on the 16th, in the course of which he gained possession of a portion of Meteren and of the site of Wytschaete village, on the 17th the enemy made a more serious attempt to capture Kemmel Hill by enveloping attacks. Eight German divisions were employed, seven of them fresh, on a front of 21,000 yards from Merris to Wytschaete, the principal thrusts being directed west and north of Bailleul and northwards from Wulverghem. The operation was a complete failure, and renewed attempts to work round Kemmel Hill on the 18th were equally unsuccessful. Though further assaults were expected by us on the 19th and counter preparation was carried out by our artillery early that morning, the enemy appeared exhausted by his previous efforts and no further attacks took place. For a week there was comparative quiet on the whole battle front.

It seemed that the northern sector also was now tolerably secure, for by this time the French were arriving in the Second Army area in considerable force. The critical period in which our battle-weary troops were fighting doggedly to hold the line till the French concentration could be completed was safely over, and that without any very material aid from the French troops assembling behind them. The first French division to reach the area of opera-

tions, the 133rd, had detrained at Steenvoorde on the afternoon of April 13 and had moved down to a support position in the Meteren sector. On the 14th the 28th French Division had arrived and had been directed towards the Wytschaete sector. A conference held at Second Army Headquarters on the morning of April 16 was attended by General Robillot,[1] commanding these French troops, and it was decided that the two French divisions should attack that evening, the 133rd Division to retake Meteren and the 28th Division to gain the Wytschaete–Wulverghem spur. These attacks were unsuccessful. The Meteren operation was timed for 6 P.M. and at that hour the 1st Australian Division attacked with one battalion on a front of 1000 yards south of Meteren and gained their objectives, but were unable to establish touch with the French whose attack was delayed till 7.30 P.M. and then did not pass beyond the line already held by the 33rd British Division! On the 19th the Australians took over the Meteren sector from the 33rd British Division.

The northern attack on the 16th by the 28th French Division was to be supported by two battalions of the 62nd Brigade, the 7th Seaforth Highlanders and two companies of the 39th Division Composite Brigade, all under the command of the 9th Division. This operation was also timed originally for 6 P.M. but was postponed until 7.30 P.M. to meet the wishes of our Allies. At 6 P.M., however, the 9th Division were informed that the French attack was to be carried out by three battalions only, instead of by a division, and twenty minutes later another telephone message was received to the effect that the French were unable to say definitely whether the attack would take place at 7.30 P.M. It did not, but at 7.30 P.M. the British attack started and despite heavy machine-gun fire from the front which the French should have attacked reached the far side of the Wytschaete defences. Here the failure of the French attack left our troops unsupported, and the British line

[1] It will be remembered that it was this General who planned the 'attack' of the 22nd French Division on March 25 south of the Somme.

finally established lay along the northern outskirts of the Wytschaete position.

Between the nights of April 18-19 and 20-21 the Kemmel sector was gradually taken over by the French. On the evening of April 24 French troops (133rd, 34th, 154th, and 28th Divisions) held from north of Bailleul to the Messines–Kemmel road, a length of some 12,500 yards,[1] with the Australian Division on their right with two brigades on a front of over 7000 yards and the 9th Division on their left, holding a front of about 5500 yards with four much reduced brigades, the 27th Brigade (9th Division), 146th Brigade (49th Division), 64th Brigade (21st Division), and 26th (9th Division). The South African Brigade was in reserve.

On April 25, the period of quiet that had followed the failure of the last German attacks on Kemmel was rudely broken by a new and successful assault. The German divisions that carried out this remarkable operation were seven in number, and though only five of them were fresh divisions, they included the Alpine Corps. The battle front extended from the Bailleul–Locre road to Hollebeke, a distance of 15,000 yards, and once more the main thrusts would seem to have been directed on either side of Kemmel Hill, so as to take the high ground by envelopment. Three German divisions, including the Alpine Corps, attacked in the Dranoutre sector and four in the Kemmel village Wytschaete sector. The four French divisions would seem to have had four German divisions exclusively on their

[1] There is a curious passage in Louis Madelin's *Le Chemin de la Victoire*, page 252, descriptive of the French share in this battle, which is worth quoting. He writes : ' Une division française, la 28e, se couvrit de gloire en défendant avec une admirable vaillance le Mont de Kemmel. On avait dit à nos hommes que la position devait l'être *coûte que coûte* ; ils la défendirent coûte que coûte. Je vis le lendemain le débris de ces magnifiques troupes : décimés, écrasés, acculés à une position devenue presque impossible à sauver, nos soldats avaient résisté de telle façon que, le Kemmel conquis, l'Allemand restait incapable de pousser plus loin.' This does less than justice to the 154th French Division, the 34th French Division, and the 133rd French Division, though to be sure the last-named division was less seriously engaged. It is particularly hard on the 154th French Division which shared rather more than equally with the 28th French Division in the responsibility of defending the hill.

front, and the 9th British Division two German divisions exclusively on its front.

The attack was preceded by a very heavy gas bombardment, and it has been suggested that a mask ill adapted to give complete protection against the latest forms of gas was one of the causes of the French discomfiture. The 9th Bn. Yorkshire Light Infantry (64th Brigade, 21st Division), which on the morning of the 25th was resting in the neighbourhood of the Kemmelbeek preparatory to taking part in a counter-attack, when moving up in the early morning—before breakfast—to join in the battle where opportunity might offer, met numbers of French troops coming back from Kemmel. These when interrogated by the British officers could give no coherent statement of what was happening beyond ejaculating the one word 'gaz.' Certain it is that on both flanks of Kemmel Hill the French line gave way at an early hour and the Germans, pushing vigorously round the foot of the hill on either side isolated its garrison, including certain British trench-mortar and machine-gun units which had been left there at the request of our Allies to strengthen the defence. The German advance on the French front was very rapid, for as early as 7.15 A.M. a report had reached 9th Divisional Headquarters that the enemy's troops were 1000 yards north by east of Kemmel village—that is to say, they were then about 2000 yards behind our right flank troops. These troops, the 12th Bn. Royal Scots, were to our certain knowledge holding their front line trenches at 7.30 A.M., for a wounded officer who left the front line at that hour brought back news that a frontal attack at about 5 A.M. had been beaten off, and that when he started back the enemy were back again in their own trenches and that no attack was taking place.

The wounded officer's report is confirmed, however, for at 7 A.M. the 6th K.O.S.B.'s holding the right sector of the 9th Division's second line of defence received a message from the Royal Scots saying that the front line was intact. At the very moment when this message was received, the 6th K.O.S.B.'s were hotly engaged with the enemy and could

see in rear of their own positions numbers of French prisoners being assembled under German guards.

These facts should be sufficient to settle on the right shoulders the responsibility for the loss of Kemmel Hill. The British right was rolled up by bodies of the enemy attacking northwards from the area of the 28th French Division, and but for the magnificent resistance of the 26th (Highland) Brigade, which succeeded not only in defending its own front but in forming a defensive flank which stopped the enemy's advance northwards, the consequences might have been even more serious than they were. Even so, the four front line battalions holding the 9th Division's right and centre were cut off almost to a man.

Readers looking at a disposition map of this battle may well notice the curious point which the left of the 28th Division's sector makes between its front line and the boundary of the XXIInd British Corps. The explanation is that in this 'point' there was a slight rise of ground forming a valuable tactical feature. The French wished this feature to be included in the front held by them and obtained their wish, although the disadvantages of such an allocation of ground and responsibility were fully realised by the 9th Division. It meant that the French defence there had no depth, and that the flank of the 9th Division would be opened up if the French left gave ground even to a very limited extent.

The effect of this battle was to push the French line back to the lower slopes of the Mont Noir–Scherpenberg hills and to the line of the Kemmelbeek, a not unfavourable position for further resistance. The situation of the British troops north of La Clytte was far less enviable, for they had no natural line of resistance and from Mont Kemmel the enemy could overlook the whole of the Ypres salient. It was decided that an immediate effort should be made to recover the lost position, and to rescue, it might be, the garrisons of certain posts which on the afternoon of the 25th our aeroplanes had reported to be still holding out on Kemmel Hill.

The counter-attack was to be delivered at 3 A.M. on the 26th by the 39th French Division (fresh) and the 25th British Division and attached units (all very tired). It was a wet and unpleasant morning, and the Germans, tired and over-confident as the result of their successful exertions on the previous day, expected nothing less than a counter-attack at such an hour. The objective of the 25th British Division was Kemmel village, and this they reached, killing many Germans and capturing others, some of whom they found asleep. On their right, the French attack failed to start—not even the artillery barrage was put down—and the troops of the 25th British Division who had reached Kemmel village were obliged to fall back.

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The capture of Kemmel Hill proved to be the final effort of any magnitude undertaken by the enemy in the Lys battle. Fierce local fighting, however, continued well into May, serving to keep alive anxiety regarding this front. Whatever may have been the French view of the performance of the British Army in these two German offensives, one result of them had been to shake materially British confidence in our Allies' power to withstand a determined and powerful German attack. The loss of Kemmel Hill had been at once a revelation and a shock. Everything in the way of position was in favour of the Allies and the French were holding their front with a division to 3100 yards on the average, exclusive of the few British auxiliaries. They had had four or five days to become acquainted with the locality, with the attached British troops to show them round. The position had been held successfully by overstrained British troops a little more than a week previously against an equally powerful if less concentrated attack. Even on the footing that the 133rd French Division was outside the area of the main thrust, our Allies had met the assault of from four to five German divisions with three French divisions and had been driven from an exceptionally strong position in a matter of an hour or two. When compared with the performances of the divisions of the Fifth Army that for a

day and a half or more had held fronts of 6000 yards against a German superiority of four or five to one, the episode gave rise to the most disturbing reflections.

There was yet another shock in store for the British Command. At about 8 A.M. on April 28, when the members of the Operations Mess were finishing breakfast, out of a clear sky as it were—for the British morning reports had disclosed nothing out of the ordinary—came an operations report containing the startling news that the enemy had captured the Scherpenberg and the whole range of the Mont Rouge–Mont Noir heights. The news was so serious, so unexpected and so unaccountable that it was received with a gasp of incredulous laughter. Then telephone wires grew hot, and shortly afterwards a second message was received from Second Army Headquarters to the effect that the Army Commander had been in direct communication with the French Corps concerned and confirmed the first report. Incredulity gave place to acute anxiety and redoubled activity. The whole of the divisions of the Second Army were in desperate danger. The Commander-in-Chief left with his Chief of Staff for Cassel as fast as a high-powered car could take them. He had been gone perhaps an hour when a third message came through over the wires explaining that the whole story was a mistake based on the report of an over-excited French artillery observer and—it may clearly be inferred—a curious lack of confidence on the part of the Commander of the French Corps.

There is one other aspect of this battle that deserves brief comment. It would seem that the experience of the March battle, when French divisions were thrust piecemeal into the battle without proper equipment and before their commanders had had time to study the situation, had decided Foch that on this occasion at any rate there should be no hurried intermingling of French units with British, but that French intervention should be delayed until the concentration of the French divisions was completed. It was a sound principle to act on when other conditions permitted, but it took a good deal for granted and exposed the

depleted British divisions to a prolonged strain which less gallant and stout-hearted troops might well have found beyond their strength. If to the sentence in Haig's Order of the Day in which he said that the French Army was moving rapidly and in great force to our support there had been added the further statement that it would be a full week before the first French division took over a sector of the line, it is doubtful whether our tired troops would have found much comfort or encouragement in the information. Was it wise to hold French troops in leash when British brigades were asked to hold the fronts of divisions against the assaults of a first-class offensive ?

There is an inevitable tendency, when troops of different nationalities are grouped under one command, for the commander to ask rather more of his Allies than he would be prepared to ask of his own troops. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Second Army on the Lys suffered from the unchecked effects of this natural tendency. It will be seen later that this was not the only instance of the kind.

CHAPTER IX

THE MIDDLE PERIOD, 1918: AND GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS

Several French writers, military and civilian, have been quoted in previous chapters on subjects such as the holding of the line; the Nivelle catastrophe and the action it forced on us after the abandonment of the Aisne offensive; and the manner in which the German strokes against our Fifth, Third, First and Second Armies in March-April 1918 were finally repelled. Their standpoint often differs from ours. Their information as to what we did is at times defective. Occasionally their comment is illogical; as, for instance, when they condemn severely the whole Nivelle scheme yet take exception apparently to Haig because he objected to Nivelle's attempts to exercise supreme dictatorship even in matters vitally affecting the safety of the British Army; and because, despite M. Briand, Mr. Lloyd George and other ardent supporters of Nivelle, he secured a revision of the decisions of the Calais Conference.

At the root of such French comment, however, there lies no mean motive. Love of their country inspires them. There appears to be a cult or vogue against that faith in some British circles to-day. Its followers preach the iniquity, or at least the *passé* nature, of patriotism; and they call, instead, for 'the parliament of man, the federation of the world.' That finds small support in dominant French circles, civilian or military. Herein the French are sound and our anti-patriots superficial; for, whether the patriotic motive be fated or not ultimately to disappear, the progress of great nations, ancient and modern, has been achieved

through it. Civilisation has so far discovered no substitute for the motive of nationality or patriotism.

French motive in this matter, then, we must respect. But it is not possible, surveying the hard facts, to adopt the view that in the offensives of March-April 1918 French troops came quickly up and by fight and genius in direction saved us and stabilised our line. The British, as we have seen, saved themselves by hard fighting and cool leadership. That they were tired and worn at the close of the second German offensive is indisputable. And for that reason, and their deficiency in numbers, it was necessary to wait some months before they were sufficiently rested and recruited from home to resume the offensive on a great scale as in 1917. But the effect of their resistance in March and April 1918 grows clear when we reach the middle period of 1918. The Germans, having failed to get a decision against us, were to attack instead the French front. They were still formidable, still very threatening. But the power of their attack had by that time been considerably reduced through the vigour of the resistance offered by the British troops in March and April.

Meanwhile the British were to be left comparatively alone. They were given a breathing space and opportunities to refit for the final offensive.[1] The Germans supposed we were fought out for the year ; and that they could safely

[1] It may be useful to show in figures the efforts of, respectively, the British and the French Armies between March 20 and September 18, 1918. Average number of divisions available—British, 54·81 : French, 102·6. Average number of men available—British, 767,340 : French, 1,128,600. Average daily number of men out of the line—British, 241,558 : French, 389,141. Average daily length of battle front held—British, 20 miles : French, 16 miles. Average daily length of quiet front held—British, 86½ miles : French, 295 miles. Total number of battle days—British, 127 days : French, 110 days. Aggregate of daily battle fronts—British, 3787½ miles : French, 3047 miles. But in regard to these figures it is necessary to bear in mind that the French battle days and battle fronts include many days and miles of front that were only conventional battle days and fronts : *e.g.* the area of the retreats before the Third and Sixth French Armies. In fact the British effort in 1918, even before the start of the attack on the Hindenburg Line, was far greater than the French. It was bound to be if we were to win in that year.

leave us alone, whilst they drew off French reserves, and by attacks on the French front cleared the way for a later decisive thrust in Flanders.

An intensely interesting question presented itself after the stabilising of our line in April north and south of the Somme and in the Lys sector, namely, what was to be the new plan of the enemy since his two great strokes for a decision against the British front and the point near Amiens where the Allied Armies joined had in the main failed ? It has been touched on in the previous chapter and must here be returned to.

North of the Somme to Arras our position was now secure. Farther north again, our vital railway communications and the French coal-fields were seriously interfered with at important points by gun-fire, but were at the conclusion of the Lys fighting no longer in gravest danger.[1] Strong enemy reserves under Rupprecht still faced us in the northern region, a danger that was to grow more menacing in another six weeks' time, but on the other hand it presently became evident that the situation of the Germans themselves there was far from enviable. The enemy had won from the French troops Kemmel Hill, a very important gain for him, yet his position in the Lys sector could only be held at a high cost. Dominated by British and French artillery during the next three months or so, it became a sepulchre for German troops.

The weakest point for the Allies, as far as the whole recent fighting front was concerned, lay south of the Somme. There was still anxiety as to what might happen here if the Germans were able to strike anew at the junction of the two armies ; and this was not completely dispelled till, months later, the British were able to strike successfully in the Battle of Amiens. The anxiety was in some degree mitigated, however, by the knowledge that the enemy had outmarched himself in the Somme offensive, and, as a result, was in

[1] At Bethune and to a less extent at Hazebrouck important railway junctions were now of little or no use to us. Accordingly we quadrupled the coast railway to carry our main traffic.

difficulties over his communications in the devastated area, which must take some time to restore. Also, by and by, we were able to improve our position substantially south of the Somme by the recapture of Vaire Wood and Hamel and by driving back the enemy from the plateau of Villers-Bretonneux. These operations (carried out with skill and spirit chiefly by the Australian Corps) were not on a large scale ; for the British Army had not yet been built up again for a great offensive early in July ; but they were encouraging, and eased the dangerous position for the Allies in front of Amiens.

The fateful question, then, for the Higher Command of both armies and the Intelligence departments to try to clear up was this—at what point on the Western Front would the next heavy German blow fall ?

Ludendorff still held the initiative. He was not in the least likely, once he had committed himself to a vast offensive, to delay his next operations till the American Army in France grew very formidable.

Those observers of modern war who, viewing it at their ease from a distance, are confident that leadership with vision can always foresee the next enemy move and arrange for its defeat should study this middle period in 1918. It might help them to realise how, in war, the obscure and uncertain remain in the case of undefeated armies a mighty element. The Allies could not be sure where the enemy would next strike during the period following the battles of the Somme and Lys ; and the enemy was in similar doubt as to the disposition of the Allies and the most favourable spot at which to aim his next blow.

Both sides in war are, in regard to future operations, largely in the dark as to the strategy of their opponents. Double the vision in the leaders of armies and the ingenuity of their calculations, this uncertainty of war will still prevail. In it, perhaps, we may find some excuse for the incident referred to in Chapter IV. of this volume, namely, an expert body, such as the war side of the Supreme War Council at Versailles, predicting a huge offensive by Ludendorff in

which the entire front of the Fifth Armyis left out of account. Whilst a few months later, Ludendorff himself, a great soldier and organiser, seems to have been in the dark about the series of decisive blows which the British Commander-in-Chief was to rain down on his armies. If adroit statesmen, who believe themselves strategists, contrive at any time to persuade their supporters that the uncertainty in war, and its huge casualties during the wearing-down period, can be evaded by genius in leadership, the prospects of an enduring world-peace will be dark.

In April and May 1918 the French Higher Command believed the Germans meant to resume their offensive on a big scale on the Arras–Amiens–Montdidier front, in spite of the fact that their communications were in a defective condition there. This view was strongly held by the French. Foch regarded Flanders as comparatively unimportant. Nor did he at this time believe the Germans would press forward to an early attack on the French front south of Montdidier. Dispositions were accordingly made, in regard to reserves, etc., to meet an attack on the Arras–Amiens–Montdidier front. The view, no doubt, was natural enough as regards the possibilities of a fresh attempt to strike in the Amiens region. Foch was staunch as to the supreme need of preserving the union between the two Allied Armies ; it was this staunchness and sound fighting spirit which, as we have seen, had lead Haig to press for his appointment as Generalissimo when in March there was a grave peril of the French troops about Montdidier falling back south-west towards Paris. As to the front north of Albert to Arras, Foch seems not to have fully realised the crushing nature of the defeat we had inflicted on the Germans there on March 28, 1918. That front had become one of the comparatively secure portions of our line in France.

This view of the French Higher Command as to the next German stroke was wide of the mark. The Germans did not continue their offensive between Montdidier and Arras : and, at the close of May, they did strike on a thirty-five mile front north-west of Reims, and achieved a success which

astonished themselves. Their attack on May 27, 1918, on the French, and on our IXth Corps which was holding the Chemin-des-Dames, will be described later. It reflected on leadership and the Intelligence side as perhaps no other Allied defeat did on the Western Front. Early in the spring the Germans had ostentatiously prepared for an attack on this French front. It did not materialise then and was not meant to, but the likelihood of the Germans—after failing to reach a decision against us in March and April—striking at the Reims front in May had been emphasised by the British. If the enemy was not able to overcome in time the difficulty he was experiencing over his communications on the Somme, it seemed indeed almost a certainty that he would next strike on that front. However, the Sixth French Army and the Intelligence bureau at G.Q.G. would not take this view till too late. Haig himself was uneasy in the matter; his Staff was equally so. But the French would not listen.

Our own G.H.Q. believed, after the conclusion of the offensive against the Third and Fifth British Armies, that the enemy would proceed to attacks on the flanks of the Allied Armies in Flanders and on the Aisne. It thought that, as his first great offensive had failed actually to break the British line and to separate the Allied Armies, the enemy would pass to an attack on those flanks in order to draw off and use up French and British reserves; and that, if he succeeded therein, he would ultimately return to the offensive against the centre for the purpose of delivering his decisive blow there. This was nearer to what actually occurred than was the French view. It is true the enemy attack on the centre for a decision was never delivered. The truth seems to be that Ludendorff lost so many men in these flank attacks in Flanders and on the French front that he had to draw on reserves to an extent which made a renewed offensive in the centre very difficult. He accordingly decided to proceed with the development of his second and less ambitious strategic plan, the capture of the Channel ports; and for that object was building up anew Rupprecht's

reserves in Flanders, when, after repeating his blows on the French front in June and July, he was himself struck heavily by Foch's fine counter-attack of July 18 which lost him the initiative.

Turning from these views of the French and British leaders respectively as to probable German plans, it is interesting to notice what Hindenburg and Ludendorff have to say in the matter.

Hindenburg in his book *Out of My Life* is not always to be taken in deadly earnest. We have found him in a jocular mood when he deals with the loss of Kemmel Hill; whilst at times he displays a romantic vein, which though attractive is not enlightening. But he is explicit on one point affecting the whole period between the offensives on the Somme and Lys and the loss in late July of the initiative by the Germans, namely, the plan for returning, sooner or later, to the attack on the British in the north. He records the German 'long-planned decisive blow at the British Army' there, and his hopes that 'we should soon settle with the English main armies in Flanders when once we succeeded in keeping the French Army from the battlefield for all time': and he writes of Ludendorff going to the army group of Rupprecht as late as the evening of July 17 to discuss the proposed attack on the English. If we are to take seriously—and probably we can—Hindenburg's statement that it was not till the German failure in the battle east and west of Reims in mid-July that 'the English armies . . . were relieved of the moral spell which we had woven round them for months,' he laboured during this period under a remarkable delusion. There was no 'moral spell,' and before the middle of July the British Army had recovered from the two spring offensives; so that its leaders did not hesitate, despite the presence of Rupprecht's reserves opposite our front, to send Foch the aid asked for. However, whether this particular statement is serious or not, Hindenburg's references (like Ludendorff's) to the meditated attack in the north bear out the British Staff's later view: the Flanders front, all through this period, was

more or less threatening, and we were bound to watch it with care.

He has nothing to say about a possible return to the offensive at the centre at Amiens.

His observations on the German attacks on the French front between May 27 and mid-July are scarcely illuminating. They leave on one the impression that a somewhat fortuitous policy prevailed. The great success of the stroke on May 27 was a surprise to the German Higher Command. Their later strokes indicate no great strategic conception, apart from engaging Allied reserves and so making an attack on the British on the northern front a more practical proposition. The close of the offensive against the French west of Reims found the Germans, he tells us, in difficulties over their communications and supplies ; hence they resolved on a further offensive in July which was to give them Reims. After that, they hoped to attack the British. The failure of the German attack on July 15 to secure Reims, and the counter-stroke by Foch three days later, ended that project.

So much for Hindenburg. Ludendorff is a more trustworthy authority. His evidence, however, on the German aims and programme during this period do not materially differ from Hindenburg's. He confirms what his colleague says about the intention to renew the attack on the British between Ypres and Bailleul if the attacks on the front farther south made between May 27 and mid-July proved successful. Rupprecht's divisions, he says, were tired and reduced by the March and April offensives against the British ; and before they could resume the attack they needed rest and reconstitution.

He knew that exhausted British divisions had been put by Foch on the Aisne front and that it was a weak spot. In April plans for an attack there were made, and the success of the stroke on May 27 was much larger than he had hoped for. The later attacks he writes of without enthusiasm. The attack delivered east and west of Reims in mid-July was 'clumsy' ; but he could not afford to wait ; and, as no better scheme presented itself, this one had to be

undertaken. The renewed offensive against the British was still the main strategic plan. He hoped, if the July attack on the French front proved a tactical success like that of May 27, to start with the attack on us early in August. After the German withdrawal from the Marne salient, it had to be abandoned, Ludendorff says, at the end of July, and the German Army must give up the initiative.

The general impression left on us, after reading Ludendorff's and Hindenburg's rather 'scrappy' observations, and considering the actual operations in this period, is scarcely one of admiration. The enemy's later efforts appear neither confident nor brilliant. The grand hopes and vigour, the masterful organising ability, which marked the first seven days' battle on the Somme against the British and so nearly led to a decision there—and which even after the hard set-back on March 28 were continued on the Lys through April—are to seek in these big diversions against the French. The tactical success of May 27 surprised its originator! The final effort on that front he thought 'clumsy'! A humiliating if honest admission by a great soldier. There is no doubt propaganda for German military purposes in Ludendorff as in Hindenburg: but this strikes one as propaganda, however unintentional, for the British Army, which by its hard fighting in the spring had spoilt his plan for a decision.

Students of Ludendorff would like to know whether he considers that an offensive on the French front, delivered with all his immense resources of March, might not after all have served his purpose. It would have carried him nearer to Paris than he ever succeeded in arriving; though on the other hand it would have left the British Army intact on his flank. However, he is not at present communicative as to this.

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Entering on this middle period of 1918 we find ourselves in a new stage of civil intervention.[1] The subject is odious,

[1] It has sometimes been assumed that the appointment of the Generalissimo in March 1918 closed the era of civilian intervention. As far as the

just as it is during the Nivelle period. Intrigue and meanness raise their heads: and the knowledge that they are more or less at play when men are giving their lives for their country is repulsive. But the subject cannot be avoided; for the civil power was to intervene in a most marked way after the appointment of Foch as Generalissimo. A member of the British Government during the latter part of the war —one who did sterling and scientific service in his own ministerial province—lately said to the writer that the War Cabinet was absolutely right in insisting that Foch should be made Generalissimo. Coming from a statesman who is nothing if not intellectual and sincere, that struck the writer as surprising. For suppose we assume, however falsely, that the War Cabinet insisted on making Foch Generalissimo: how came it that, in at least two instances, which must here be considered, this same Cabinet suggested a course which, if the British Commander-in-Chief had fallen in with it, would have dashed French hopes, and have made Foch's own position as futile as Nivelle's when French statesmen intervened just before and soon after the Battle of the Aisne?

The British Prime Minister, in one of his speeches, declared that strategy and politics are indissolubly connected. There is truth in that. The statesman decides whether there shall be war or not. He cannot be expected to stand aside from the broader and general aspects of the strategy of that war —outside, that is, purely military operations with which he is, as a civilian, incapable of dealing.

He is in charge, too, of the home effort. He has to determine as the campaign proceeds how many men he can recruit and place at the service of the commander-in-chief without dangerously checking the flow of munitions of war of all kinds and the food supply for the front and the base.

Western Front is concerned, this is wide indeed of the mark. On the contrary, the attempts of the powers at home to intervene in military operations and decisions of the highest importance were quite as dangerous till the close of August 1918 as during any period in 1916 and 1917. But, as we shall discover, they were, thanks to the British Commander-in-Chief, warded off.

Thus the civilian leader at home could not be expected to stand aside altogether from strategy, if, for instance, he and his advisers considered the leaders in the field were undertaking a campaign too vast for the home resources in men and material.

Besides, clearly, he must intervene in strategy if the soldiers propose a course of action which may involve us with neutral States.

Those people, whose views of war and its direction are not impregnated with what is known as 'Prussianism,' need, therefore, take no exception to the British Prime Minister's statement that strategy and politics are to-day inseparable. The history of the war between Great Britain and France more than a hundred years ago shows the civil power, notably in the person of William Pitt, intervening in strategy.

But the political or ministerial interventions during this middle period in 1918 concerned matters which a wise Cabinet would have left to the leadership in the field. That is the point. It will be claimed by the ardent friends of the War Cabinet that these interventions were prompted through patriotism, through anxiety for the safety of the British Army in France. Let us grant it freely. Yet they showed lack of nerve and confidence. They were, in two instances, clumsy or misinformed almost past belief: and, had they been acted on, their effect must have been disastrous.

The interventions of the French civil power during the Nivelle period have been considered. These, too, were inspired by patriotism, and by anxiety as to the safety of the French Army. The manner of these interventions, at the Compiègne Conference and later, was improper. But at least they were not calculated to set the two leaders of the Allied Armies at ill accord with each other. Moreover, in the result, the intervention of the French Ministers in 1917 was in a way justified. Had there been no intervention by the French Minister for War and the French Premier in that case, it is an open question whether a great national and Allied defeat would not have occurred.

We shall assume good motive, then, alike behind the French political interventions in 1917 and the British political interventions in 1918. As to judgment in the 1917 case, it may have been good, it may have been bad. As to judgment in the 1918 case, it is to-day hard to imagine how any unbiassed person can regard that as anything but bad. The two military leaders in 1918 had on occasion their different standpoints under the method of 'unity of command,' as the two military leaders had in 1916 under the method of independent command. But they were able at both periods to adjust these differences, and to reach the accord that was indispensable to victory. The object of the ministerial intervention was not to sow discord between them, or make the system unworkable. None the less, it would, it must, have had that effect if it had been accepted by the British Commander-in-Chief.

CHAPTER X

THE MIDDLE PERIOD, 1918: AND GOVERNMENT INTERVENTIONS (*Continued*)

The uncertainty as to where, after the offensives of the Somme and Lys, the enemy would strike next vitally affected the question of reserves behind our own and the French front, where and in what strength they should be placed. In fact, before the end of April 1918, the whole subject of the general distribution of Allied troops on the Western Front came to the fore. The British had borne the vast burden of defence in 1918 as they had borne the vast burden of offence in 1917; and it was well recognised by those in command on the Western Front that if the German Army was to be defeated in 1918, the British Army must be the chief weapon of accomplishment. That army must therefore now have relief, and as far as possible some rest. Hence French reserves had been moved north at Foch's directions behind the British right, and had relieved certain of our exhausted divisions in Flanders, which were brought out of the line to rest and refit. But if this method continued, there would presently be too many divisions behind our front, the majority of them tired and unfit for hard fighting yet awhile; whilst the French front would be dangerously denuded of reserves. Foch therefore was naturally anxious to have a roulement of British and French divisions on the French front, even, if necessary, an admixture of British and French troops. The plan was not an ideal one, but the difficulty referred to above had to be adjusted somehow, and Haig was therefore willing to meet Foch in the matter. After all, as far back as the early spring of 1916, he had declared himself quite willing to help his colleague Joffre

by despatching British troops to Verdun. That proposal was not adopted, but there was hearty understanding between the two leaders. Haig now resolved to meet Foch's wish. He accordingly decided on a roulement.

But on May 19 the War Office informed the British leader by telegram that the War Cabinet was uneasy lest the British Army should sacrifice its identity by such a step. Roulement was opposed in spirit by Kitchener's instructions of December 28, 1915. The Cabinet presumed that Foch's request would be refused. The argument in regard to Kitchener was remarkable, for his instructions had also laid it down definitely that Haig's command must be an independent one. Yet at Calais at the end of February 1917 this instruction had been passed over by the Cabinet which had subordinated him to Nivelle.

Roulement, however, was decided on. The IXth Corps was sent to the French front as Foch desired. Unfortunately it was placed by Foch in a wrong sector altogether—about the last sector in the whole French front where rest was likely. But that was another matter and did not affect the question whether or not roulement generally, in the circumstances, was advisable or not.

The point in Kitchener's instructions of December 28, 1915, having been raised through this incident, it became necessary to revise the charter. The British leader's position had to be somewhat better defined. On June 22, 1918, he received instructions that 'if the Allied Commander-in-Chief issued instructions which in the Field-Marshal Commander-in-Chief's opinion would if carried out imperil the British Army, the latter should appeal to the British Government': additionally, 'any roulement of British troops to the French front must be temporary and they should rejoin the British forces as early as possible'—an illustration of the fact referred to in Chapter IV. of this volume that on the British Commander-in-Chief, on the second in command, falls the real responsibility for the safety of his army even though the Generalissimo may issue the order which places that army in jeopardy. True, there is the appeal to the

civil power at home on an emergency. But that must be useless if the emergency is critical and sudden, as emergency in war always is, calling for immediate action ; and, anyhow, it is always liable to lead to friction and failure in military plans.

Nevertheless this safeguard—nothing better offering—was desirable in case inconsiderate demands were made at any time on the British leader. Possibly it was the best that could be devised to meet the case ; though the instances in which the civil power intervened without being appealed to may shake confidence in any proviso of the kind.

Rupprecht's reserves, apparently not much reduced, remained at this time concentrated opposite the British front ; and they were still there later when the Crown Prince's reserves opposite the French front had been largely used up. Through May and June 1918 Rupprecht's forces remained more or less intact ; and this menace to the British front was obvious. We believed the Germans were preparing to renew their attack on the Scherpenberg–Mont-des-Cats ridge. That was the view of the British Headquarters Staff in the middle of May. The attack was not delivered, but our surmise was correct. When, later, during the British offensive, the Germans fell back in Flanders, we discovered great quantities of dumps, etc., in the German front lines, the object obviously being the capture of the entire line of hills behind Kemmel, and thence an advance to the Channel ports. Thus Hindenburg's and Ludendorff's disclosures are confirmed.

Is it far-fetched to suggest that Ludendorff might have driven forward his preparations for this attack and delivered it, had he known fully of the withdrawal of Allied reserves from this part of the British front from May onwards ?

During the fighting in the spring certain American units had been attached to the British Army for instruction. They did not take part in the fighting, but their presence and good comradeship gave us moral support. This arrangement was appreciated by both British and American troops. There was a prospect that, eventually, we might be able to in-

corporate as many as ten American divisions in the British Army for a period of training. These hopes disappeared, for the whole of the American forces except two divisions were withdrawn from the British lines. Also seven divisions of French troops which had come into the Lys sector, etc., were withdrawn south. We were expected at the same time to localise a British group of divisions astride the Somme. The position which these withdrawals from the north caused was grave. It became desirable to direct particular attention to it. It is true our Somme line—as distinguished from the Lys position—had stabilised early in April, and the main purpose of the enemy—a decision—had failed, thanks to the fact that Foch heartily concurred with Haig that the junction of the French and British Armies must at all costs be preserved. It is also true that our Army was now being reinforced and was getting some slight rest and chance of refitting itself. At the same time, as long as the reserves opposite us were kept comparatively intact by Ludendorff, we could not freely send south our divisions whilst French and American support was thus being withdrawn. There was in mid-May 1918 no point in the British line between the Belgians and the French south of the Somme where ground could be yielded with the least degree of safety. A retreat here comparable to the retreat which the French forces were to make at the end of May and in June 1918 before the Germans must speedily have given away the Channel ports.

Therefore it was necessary temperately to discuss the position presented through these withdrawals, and requests for British assistance farther south. The British Government was disquieted, in this instance rightly, and on June 7 at Paris there was a conference—civilian and military—between the Allies.

The anxiety of the French in June 1918 and Foch's wish to strengthen his front can be readily understood. The French had just been heavily hit and thrown back over a wide front. Fortunately, the ground chosen by the Germans was not inviting for an advance on Paris. There was forest

in their way, and the roads led in the wrong direction. The attack on May 27 had not been delivered for the purpose of a quick advance on Paris. It was, as we know, in the nature of a big diversion, Ludendorff still intending to strike again from the north. Still, its success was large, and the Germans were to follow it up within a few days with a further attack between Montdidier and Noyon—which, unlike that of May 27, did not take the French by surprise.

Thus the French situation was serious ; and the thrust in the direction of Paris might naturally affect the French Government as in March. A redeeming feature in this situation, however, as compared with that of March was that the Allied leaders in the field were of one intention as regards main strategic aims. To keep the junction between the two armies intact remained the first aim, Haig's strategy throughout which had been wisely adopted. Additionally, the French Generalissimo signified that to cover both Paris and the Channel ports remained his purpose, as he had declared at Abbeville in May.

British leadership had every wish to respond to Foch's call for assistance in the struggle in which the French Army was involved. Owing to the progress made by the Germans in the attack on May 27, the French front had been much extended and the bulk of the French reserves drawn in for defence. Therefore Foch had demanded that the British should send their own reserves to the south of the Somme. We were prepared to meet his wishes, to supply without delay every available unit, provided the situation opposite our front suffered us to do so without peril to the British Army. It must always be borne in mind that a heavy enemy blow at this time delivered successfully on the British front in the north must prove fatal to the French as to ourselves. It must be once more repeated—*we had simply no ground to give up.* Therefore, until at any rate the bulk of Rupprecht's reserve divisions were removed from our front, and sent south of the Somme to join in the German attacks on the French, it would be bad generalship to denude the British front. Our Staff considered that the arrangements

for a German attack on us on a great scale were practically complete, and could be delivered within forty-eight hours.

Before any French order was given to move divisions under British command, due notice ought to be given, so that the British leader should have an opportunity to state his objections if he had any. That was the reasoned and moderate British military line in June 1918.

As to the conference, views were stated, questions asked, no particular decision reached. Conferences, civilian and military mixed, for the purposes of war, are not helpful in actual crises. In diplomacy, where the object is often not so much to decide as to defer through discussion, lies the true *métier* of expert conference minds. Doullens on March 26, 1918, has been claimed as an example of success in war by conference, civilian and military mixed. But the decision reached at Doullens had been, in effect, reached at Dury. Calais in February 1917 and Compiègne in April 1917 are more illuminative examples of this kind of conference. True, a decision was recorded at Calais ; but then it had been carefully concocted beforehand ; and a fortnight later it had to be whittled down because it was unworkable in the field.

At the same time this conference was necessary whether it reached a decision or not : it was imperative to make it clear to Foch that too much must not be asked from the British troops at a time when they were themselves faced by the menace of a fresh German offensive in the north. How real and great this menace was we learnt beyond the shadow of a doubt later, long before Ludendorff and Hindenburg recorded the facts in their war books. Up till the beginning of June the British Commander-in-Chief had never questioned a single decision of the French Generalissimo's. He had, for instance, as we have seen, waited with exemplary patience for the arrival of the French troops during the Battle of the Lys—where they were actually not taking over any of our line till April 19, ten days after the battle had been joined. The French Higher Command at that

time had not been perhaps especially impressed by the position in the north, owing to the belief that a greater offensive was still threatened against the French front, and that Paris was the German goal. However, there must be some limit to the patience of a commander-in-chief who is held by his own Government absolutely responsible for the safety of his army, generalissimo or no generalissimo : hence the need to call a conference in June 1918 and remind Foch of this.

The whole incident illustrates the extreme difficulty and delicacy of what is known as 'unity of command' under a generalissimo : and also the fact that it must for success depend on the character and judgment of the two leaders in the field. Foch, it is true, had protested to Haig that he could not submit to any order of his relative to the movement of divisions being questioned : but he had agreed that, in future, any such order should go to the British Commander-in-Chief first. There is no virtue whatever in 'unity of command' in allied warfare with a generalissimo unless the right men are directing it : on the contrary, without this, it is certain to end in disaster. Dictation such as Nivelle strove for in March 1917 with the encouragement of M. Briand and his colleagues can only mean disunity and, if insisted on, a break in the alliance. Statesmen who wish to understand modern warfare, and are at all likely to be involved in it with Allies, should look very carefully into this and similar incidents in 1918 : then they will not be carried away by a phrase because it appeals to the ear and acquires popularity.

The Rupprecht reserves, grouped about Douai and Valenciennes, continued through June and the opening weeks of July 1918 to face the British front, and the menace of a renewed German offensive on us in the north was by no means removed. Ludendorff tells us it was timed for the close of July, and, as we have seen, it was not actually abandoned till about a week after the French counter-attack on the 18th of that month. One of the reasons why it held fire was no doubt the very heavy casualties which our artillery had inflicted on the Germans in the Lys salient.

Meanwhile the enemy decided on a renewed offensive

on the French. His attack between Montdidier and Noyon on June 9, two days after the discussion referred to above, had carried him nearer to Paris, but its success had not been as remarkable as the previous one on May 27 ; and he now designed a bigger effort on a fifty-mile front east and west of Reims. The preparations for it could not be kept secret. The French learnt about it, and on July 11 Foch asked the British Chief of Staff, in the absence of the British Commander in-Chief who was in London at the time, to come to him at Bourbon. Foch said he was certain the Germans were about to strike in great force on both sides of Reims ; and their attack might extend into the Argonne. He admitted that the Rupprecht reserves still threatened the British front ; but, holding that the Germans might now attack the French front in sufficient force to endanger his position, he asked for the support of four British divisions —two to be sent south of the Somme, and the other two astride the river, in order to ensure the connection between the Allied forces about Amiens. This would enable him to move four of his own divisions farther east on his right flank and meet the German attack.

The danger being imminent we agreed at once to Foch's request, and orders were issued accordingly. If the expected German attack did not materialise before July 18 Foch intimated that he would himself start the counter-attack on the west flank of the Château Thierry salient which Pétain had been preparing. We were ourselves at this time arranging for an attack east of Amiens, and the Fourth Army was to be reinforced for that purpose.

Two days later, Foch asked for additional support—in fact, that we should double our aid to him in view of the great impending German attack. Would we contribute eight British divisions, instead of four, to the assistance of the French ? Would we place four divisions unreservedly at the service of Foch for employment with the French forces now being threatened, and send at once another four to take their place south of the Somme and astride the river ?

Promptly, the first four divisions, with a Corps Head-

quarters Staff under Lieut.-General Sir A. Godley, were ordered by the British Chief of Staff to move south, and the first two divisions of the second series were under orders. On July 14 the Commander-in-Chief returned from England and approved the whole decision. A meeting with Foch took place at Monchy and we then and there intimated our intention to do all that Foch desired.

Next day the Germans launched their big attack on the French.

As we have lately been examining the question whether reserves should be handled by some sort of committee, Aulic council or deliberative executive representing several nations, it may be asked—Would Foch, in the peril which suddenly confronted him east and west of Reims, have fared as well if his request had been made not to the British G.H.Q. on July 11 but to some such body instead ? It is possible to throw light on this, because, as it happens, a committee composed not of three or four nations but of one nation actually did offer its intervention. The committee in question was composed of the British Government.

Hearing of the requests of Foch for immediate assistance against the impending attack by the Germans, the Government sent General Smuts to France to see Haig and enquire —Was it advisable for the Government to intervene at this stage ? Rupprecht's reserves still fronted us, and plans for a German attack on our front were known to exist.

Haig did not adopt this suggestion.

General Smuts returned to England with the clear intimation that Haig meant to give Foch all the aid asked for ; and himself to bear all responsibility in the matter.

Haig and his Chief of Staff had taken into consideration the whole position and reached a prompt decision. The presence of Rupprecht's groups of reserves opposite our front was a serious matter, but the threat in the north was not at the time so grave as at an earlier stage when the British Commander-in-Chief had been compelled to make his position clear in case excessive demands were made on him. Hence he determined at once to come to the aid of Foch.

The necessary reserves were despatched south. On July 15 the Germans struck on both sides of Reims. On July 18 Foch, reinforced by the Americans, attacked between Soissons and Château Thierry, and two days later the British XXIInd Corps under Lieut.-General Sir A. Godley was involved in the fighting, which continued to the close of the month.

The whole incident well illustrates how reserves should be controlled ; and how they were controlled in 1918 when handled by leadership in the field which had made a close study of the position, and had the nerve to act on an emergency and act swiftly on its own responsibility.

This incident, though one of exceptional importance as the moment was critical, is not the solitary example of the kind worth recalling. Turning back to Chapter III. of Vol. I. we find Joffre appealing to Haig, and Haig, when the Verdun crisis threatened France, responding at once in exactly the same spirit as in July 1918.

This method of handling reserves and of carrying on war —in which the reserves must always be a great essential factor—will strike most people as the intelligent and scientific one. A committee sitting down at the close of the second week of July 1918 to study the situation, and consider whether it ought or ought not to meet Foch's demand for aid, would not have been immediately helpful to the Allied cause when Ludendorff launched his attack on July 15.

Can sufficient excuse be found for the conduct of the civil power in despatching General Smuts on this mission, and suggesting a course which must have delayed the assistance to Foch at a moment when swift decision and hearty co-operation were necessary if he was to meet the German attack, and a day or two later launch his own admirably prepared counter-attack ? Let us grant without reservation that the motive at home was well meant. The civil power was concerned about the safety of the British Army. But the foresight or the judgment which such a proposal at such a critical moment implied—who can set a high value on that ?

What would have been the feelings of the French nation and of Foch himself if our leadership had acted on the suggestion and withheld, at this highly critical time, his support ? And what would have become of 'The great and sublime unities of the intense period of the struggle' which Mr. Churchill spoke about ? [1]

This incident is not cited in order to set 'the soldiers' against 'the politicians.' That would be puerile. Moreover it is false to pretend that in war 'the politicians' are always crossing 'the soldiers.' When Haig offered to help to his utmost Joffre in February 1916, and send British troops to Verdun if the French leader desired it, the civil power at home interfered in no way. Its judgment under Mr. Asquith would have forbidden any move of that nature. But there were plenty of statesmen and politicians in high office in the Governments of 1916, 1917 and 1918 who did sterling work at home and who were incapable of doing anything to embarrass 'the soldiers.'

An excuse for this offer of intervention by the Government can hardly be found in the arrangement made at Beauvais in the spring, which gave to each Commander-in-Chief the right to apply to his own Government if he regarded any direction by the French Generalissimo as perilous to his army. Nor can it be found in the modification of the Kitchener instructions which was drawn up in June : 'if any order given by him [the French Generalissimo] appears to you to imperil the British Army, it is agreed between the Allied Governments that you should be at liberty to appeal to the British Government before executing such order. While it is hoped that the necessity for such an appeal may seldom, if ever, arise, you will not hesitate in cases of grave emergency to avail yourself of your right to make it.' Some such safeguard—whether practicable or not in a sudden emergency of war—was, as already pointed out, inevitable. It always will be inevitable in allied warfare where great nations are concerned and where a system of unity of control under a generalissimo is adopted. But the safeguard left

[1] *Daily News*, June 20, 1922.

the initiative, if there must be an appeal, to the Commander-in-Chief ; whereas in this case the Government itself took the initiative and suggested to the Commander-in-Chief that he should appeal. That seems to be neither in the letter nor in the spirit of the arrangement between the two Governments and the military leaders.

On August 6, 1919, in the House of Commons, the Prime Minister made a speech in relation to generalship in the war. After having alluded to Haig as one who had 'subordinated' himself to the demands of the country and 'accepted' the command of Marshal Foch, he went on to speak of the winning of the war by Foch ; and, glancing through the speech, we notice it is illumined by such words as 'genius,' 'vision,' 'brilliancy,' 'skill.' The wealth of this terminology is so lavish as almost to suggest that the speaker had been studying synonyms in Roget's *Thesaurus*. What would his hearers and readers in August 1919 have thought of these superlatives, of the statement that we were saved by the genius of Marshal Foch, had they known that in July 1918, when Foch sought and depended on prompt British aid in the field, dilatory procedure was suggested by the civil power in this country !

Moreover, who can wonder at the anger of large numbers of French people when they compare the attitude of the British Prime Minister for a year or more after the war with his attitude in 1921 and 1922 when he opposed their demands ? 'We were saved by the genius of Marshal Foch,' exclaims the Prime Minister—in other words, 'we were saved by the genius of France.' Yet a year or so after this the same Prime Minister starts opposing the very nation to which he has lately been attributing our salvation ; and opposing in matters she regards as supremely necessary to her own safety. A nation whose Prime Minister announces that it has been saved by the genius of an Ally is under immense obligations to that Ally ; and in a large degree must it not subordinate its policy, certainly its foreign policy, to its saviour ? But that escaped the notice of the Prime Minister. In the fervour of an oration perhaps he had

altogether overlooked this point. Moreover, it appears never to have occurred to the Prime Minister, in withholding from the British leadership credit for the high skill and judgment in the operations of 1918, and in attributing it instead to French genius, he was weakening his own position as an arbiter in Europe.[1]

* * * * * * *

The question, in an acute form, of moving French divisions to the support of the British and British divisions to the support of the French passes, after the incident in July 1918, lately referred to, from the struggle on the Western Front. There arose later another question as to the use of the Second British Army in Belgium which called for intervention, but that was not of quite the same genre, and the crisis of the war was over. Such controversies ought not to be suppressed or slurred over, years after the conclusion of peace. They should be frankly stated, and borne well in mind. It is imperative in the interests of peace that they should be stated. Great nations will be the more averse from war—no matter how powerful an alliance they may be promised in the waging of it—when they recall and ponder on such awkward, perilous incidents. To gloss them over, or make light of them, is helpful not to the spirit and interests of peace, but to those of war.[2]

[1] William Pitt has been freely criticised as a War Minister. But certainly he was not wanting in gratitude to military leaders who won his campaigns. Thus in 1804, after our successes in India, he wrote himself to Wellesley acknowledging 'the brilliant and extraordinary successes . . . obtained under your auspices and direction,' and on 'a series of events which has produced so large an accession of personal glory to yourself and of power and reputation to the country.' Compared with the British victories between, say, August 8 and August 31, Wellesley's operations appear minute enough. Pitt may or may not have overestimated Wellesley's skill and success. But at least his generosity and his sense of propriety contrast agreeably with the attitude of Ministers in 1918.

[2] It is not the way of the professional soldier to be constantly holding forth on the blessings of peace. But that the leader of a great army is not necessarily what is known as 'militarist' in inclination may be illustrated by a message sent from this country in the autumn of 1921 to President Harding, U.S.A.

'As president of the British Empire Service League [wrote Lord Haig],

Intervention, or attempted intervention, by the civil power ceased, then, after this incident in July, as far as concerned the delicate question of transferring troops of different nationalities from front to front in France. But civil intervention was to be repeated once more, within the next six weeks, in a form which we cannot pass over.

On August 31, 1918, the British Army was advancing from triumph to triumph over a wide extent of front. The wonderful scheme of operations in which it was then involved will later be described by Colonel Boraston. The Battles of Amiens and of Bapaume had been fought and won, the Battle of the Scarpe had drawn in the First Army and within a few days was to result in the breaking of the Drocourt–Quéant switch line. The British Commander-in-Chief had taken the tide in the affairs of war at its flood and was leading on to victory : whilst behind him was Foch elated over the success of the British operations and urging that we should strike and strike again. Therein Foch showed true comradeship and excellent military sense. These operations were wholly of British design ; and as soon as they had been accepted and successfully entered on there was no serious difference between Haig's and Foch's points of view. This fact could not have been unknown to either the British or the French Governments. The latter at any rate did nothing to disturb the excellent relations between the two leaders in the field. It recognised the high value of a complete *entente* between commanders-in-chief. It recognised that every blow the British Army now struck at the German Army in retreat brought within realisation the long deferred hope of clearing France of the enemy.

The military leaders in the field, therefore, having

I am desired, in the name of the seven million ex-Service men of the British Empire, respectfully to convey to you our warm congratulations upon your splendid efforts to establish more firmly the foundations of world peace. We assure you of our heartfelt sympathy, and of our strong hope that the movement you are now inaugurating may prove an important step towards the realisation of those high ideals of just dealing and goodwill between the nations for the sake of which so many of your countrymen and ours died in the Great War.'

composed their differences of view as to how and where we should strike, were at entire accord, and the French Government was wholly with them.

At this moment the British Government actually thought its intervention desirable! On August 31, 1918, the British Commander-in-Chief received in cipher a telegram indicating that the War Cabinet would become anxious if severe casualties were incurred by him in attacking the Hindenburg Line. This came in the form of a 'Personal' message through the War Cabinet at home.[1]

The meaning of this extraordinary communication was, and is, clear. The War Cabinet took alarm as our Army approached the Hindenburg Line. Casualties looked like mounting—as they were bound to. The War Cabinet did not comprehend the success of the British operations in August. It clearly did not trust the Commander-in-Chief. Nor did it consider, apparently, what his relations with Foch and the French must henceforth be if he now checked his advance to victory. So it contrived to convey to him the intimation that if he attacked the Hindenburg Line—which must mean heavy casualties—*and failed to carry it*, his position as leader of the British Army would be, well—jeopardised.

No intervention, direct or indirect, by the civil power, either British or French, between 1914 and 1918, was perhaps quite on a par with this. It is hard to say whether its timidity or its ghastly failure to understand the military situation at the close of August 1918 was the more marked.

The British Commander-in-Chief proceeded with his operations as if the message had never been conveyed to him. He regarded it with contempt. The Drocourt–

[1] Surely a strange and highly irregular method, which started early in August. Let us hope that this course will never again be resorted to by a British Government in war-time.

Quéant line was broken three days later, and the way prepared for the expulsion of the enemy from the whole Siegfried positions.

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Summarising, within the period December 1915-November 1918, the six instances mentioned in these volumes in which differences of a pronounced character arose between the Allies in regard to operations on the Western Front, we find that in three the civil power, or War Cabinet, intervened, or proposed to intervene ; in the other three cases the civil power stood aside altogether.

First, we will recall the latter.

(1) On July 3, 1916, Joffre, with whom was Foch, urged that we should at once renew our attack on the Thiepval ridge. We had attacked this shoulder on July 1, and had failed. The troops attacking it showed great gallantry, but the new Kitchener Army had as yet little experience of warfare—none at all of an offensive on the scale of the Battle of the Somme conducted against an enemy entrenched in positions of extraordinary strength. We had yet to learn how to deal, for instance, with the defence by German machine gunners, and our creeping barrage had not developed at this period. A new army cannot learn except through actual experience : that is illustrated by the American divisions in their very gallant but costly attack on the Hindenburg Line in September 1918, as it is by our own attack on Thiepval in July 1916. Recognising the difficulty and danger of renewing the attack on the immensely strong enemy position at Thiepval, Haig resolved to proceed instead with his operations on the Montauban side. The French leadership, however, was set on the capture of the Thiepval ridge and insisted it must be proceeded with. Haig declined. The Thiepval attack was deferred till the autumn, when we were able to make a flank attack. Joffre with common sense accepted Haig's decision. He could well afford to do so without weakening his own position or authority : Haig, for his part, being always ready to accept in the main Joffre's strategic directions.

(2) In 1917 Nivelle and his Staff urged that we ought not to attack the Vimy Ridge in the spring of 1917, preparatory to the Battle of Arras which we were to undertake on his behalf. They declared it was unnecessary to secure Vimy, and they made light of the scheme of attack, when, later, they saw this at the headquarters of the First Army. Haig and his Staff and the Commander of the First Army insisted that Vimy must be secured. Ultimately, Nivelle gave way. Vimy was taken. Possibly, a few who deliberately prefer to take an unusual view of military operations may insist that in regard both to Thiepval and Vimy the British leader's views were wrong and the French view sound. But surely not more than a few; and those few nothing if not absurd.

(3) In August 1918 we shall reach a difference of opinion even more vital than that relating to Vimy, namely, when Foch wished for and insisted on a 'hammer-and-tongs' attack on the Roye–Chaulnes line, and Haig had to refuse, because he saw that such an operation was crude and proposed only a frontal attack on an expectant and strongly posted enemy, and because he had in view an entirely different scheme, which, when accepted, broadened out almost at once into the series of brilliant operations which broke the German Army at its centre.

In this instance, as in those of 1916 and 1917, there was a direct clash of opinion between the French and the British military leaders : an awkward position arose and had to be faced. Yet in all three instances the leaders in the field ultimately settled their differences ; and they worked together after these settlements. Foch gave way with common sense as Joffre had done. Even in 1917, we find Nivelle and Haig holding together when the French Government was stopping the main operations. The fact is the leaders in the field were able to adjust their differences when left to their own devices. The solitary exception during the 1916-1918 period was when Haig, after the interview at Dury on the night of March 24, 1918, felt compelled to send a telegram to the British Government. But would even that have been necessary had the French Government not been

in a state of terror about Paris should the German advance continue in the direction of Amiens ? It is a point, admittedly, hard to feel sure about. In any case, the leaders in the field did settle their differences satisfactorily in the instances cited in 1916, 1917 and 1918. And it is fortunate that there was no intervention through the civil power, British or French.

Next, recall the three instances, one in 1917 and two in 1918, where the civil power intervened, or proposed to intervene, at highly critical periods.

(1) In the first instance the civil power intervened in an arbitrary manner. It accepted the plan by which Nivelle proposed to break the German Armies in France within the space of twenty-four hours, and on the strength of it placed Nivelle over Haig and the British Army without even first consulting the C.I.G.S. or the C.-in-C. The result was thoroughly bad. It forced an offensive on the British Army during the greater part of 1917 before which the civil power in this country shrank. That indeed was active intervention by the civil power.

(2) Having in February 1917 actually intervened in the conduct of military operations—for if the act of the War Cabinet in deciding to subordinate, unknown to the C.I.G.S. and the C.-in-C., the British Army to Nivelle was not intervening in the conduct of military operations one knows not what could be described as intervention—the civil power in this country proceeded in July 1918 to attempt intervention by offering the British Commander-in-Chief their aid in case he refused—as they presumed he would refuse—to assist Foch at a time of supreme need. This appears more like an attempt to subordinate Foch—by means of an appeal to Haig if it could be effected—to the British War Cabinet ; a curious contrast with the February 1917 scheme which put Haig under Nivelle. It was declined by the British Commander-in-Chief, Foch being given at once the assistance he asked for and was in urgent need of.

(3) Finally, on August 31, 1918, we reach the civil power's intervention calculated to check the great British offensive

by giving the British Commander-in-Chief to understand he must not run the risk of severe casualties; that nothing but success would justify him in attacking the Hindenburg Line, to which the Germans were at the time retreating.

In all three of these instances, one in 1917 and two in 1918, the intervention was at the expense of the leader of the British Army—though, incidentally, in two of them it was also at the expense of Foch. The War Cabinet, in fact, can have had no real confidence in the British leader. It probably did not believe he had the 'cleverness' to win. That was why he was subordinated to Nivelle at the Calais Conference in February 1917. This search for a 'clever' military leader, who could explain his programme in a manner easy for civilian inexperts and orators to understand, received a hard blow when the Battle of the Aisne in April 1917 failed to achieve what its originator expected. But in the summer of 1918, even after the Battles of Amiens and Bapaume and the Scarpe, the view seems still to have obtained in the War Cabinet that our leadership wanted the higher military intelligence and judgment; and, in speeches made in the House of Commons late in 1918 and far into the summer of 1919, this view was made evident.

There was, however, besides the disbelief in the Commander-in-Chief's ability to lead an army of millions to victory, another motive which constantly affected the civil power, inducing it actually to intervene or to offer outright, or suggest, its intervention when such intervention was not called for; and also inducing it to withhold troops from the Western Front, as during the opening months of 1918 when we most needed reinforcements against the impending German attack. This motive was the dread of casualties. Now, on the face of it, the motive may appear to be right and sound. Let us therefore look into the matter and see whether the civil power was justified or not justified in intervening through fear of casualties.

William Sharp, in his *Recollections by Samuel Rogers*,' [1]

[1] Published by Longman, Green, Longman & Roberts, 1859.

gives a note as to the Duke of Wellington after the Battle of Waterloo. The Duke said, 'The next greatest misfortune to losing a battle is to gain such a victory as this.' Rogers in his *Common Place Book* preserved a like remark made on another occasion: 'What a glorious thing must be a victory, Sir!' said . . . to the Duke. 'The greatest tragedy in the world, Madam; except a defeat.' The casualties of war were in the soldier's thought when he spoke, and few great men of war would be found to disagree with the Duke of Wellington in this—assuredly not the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army from December 1915 to the end of the war. The heaviness of our casualties in 1916 and 1917 when we were compelled to take the burden of offence, in the spring of 1918 when we had to sustain the full force of the German attack, and finally between August 8 and November 11, 1918, when we had to play the greatest part in breaking the enemy's army, were tragic indeed and deplorable. The British leadership in the field was throughout the period at least as concerned by that as the civilian power at home. But heavy casualties are the logical result of a vast, relentless world war which the civil power insists must be carried *à outrance*. In 1917 the Prime Minister announced our policy as the policy of 'the knock-out blow.' That meant, considering the great and resolute military nation we were fighting, that we could not win except at the price of exceedingly high casualties. It is true there was a vague notion that we might be able to deal the 'knock-out blow' by some romantic diversion on a southern or eastern front, and so keep casualties from mounting very high. But this romance was not kept up after the Germans launched their offensive on the Western Front in 1918. In 1917, when the French Government was preparing to end the offensive at the Aisne, even the Prime Minister, as General Mangin tells us, declared at the Paris Conference in May that casualties could not be shirked in war.

Yet the War Cabinet returned to and persisted in these conflicting, mutually destructive lines of policy—a 'knock-out blow' to be inflicted on the Germans, but no heavy

casualties to be incurred by the British Commander-in-Chief in the process !

They laid down a line of policy, the 'knock-out blow,' which must mean—and in the result did mean—a high and absolutely unavoidable bill : but they shrank away from that bill, and did not hesitate on, for instance, August 31, 1918, to convey to the Commander-in-Chief an intimation that only success could excuse him if he incurred heavy casualties in an attack on the Hindenburg Line.[1]

At the same time he was expected to work in true unison with Foch—and Foch was eager at all costs that his colleague should go on without a pause in the attack by British troops which now began to promise an early victory and the freeing of France from the Germans.

Thus the task which the British War Cabinet at this period wished to put on the leader of our armies was impossible.

In this conflict of counsel and counsellors—as remote from the principle known as 'unity of command' as anything in war could be—Haig took the only course which could serve the Allied cause and bring victory in 1918. He followed his own conscience and his own military judgment. He simply went on with the series of operations which broadened out into the advance of three of his armies from south of the Somme to Arras. As was suggested in an early chapter of this book, the term genius in regard to all recent operations in war had better be used sparingly, time being the only sure judge in this matter. But if genius is to be claimed for any stroke in the European War this incomparable series of operations must obviously have, as far as the main theatre is concerned, the chief consideration : especially in view of the extraordinary difficulties which confronted the leader of the British troops at the time.

During the second half of August, about the most critical period of all, the British Commander-in-Chief had to meet the opposition not only of foe but of friend—and perhaps the leader of armies would vote the latter to be the more embarrassing.

[1] By the way, he was—it appears—free to drive the enemy back to the Hindenburg Line, but attacking them there was another matter.

CHAPTER XI

THE ATTEMPT TO BREAK THROUGH THE FRENCH FRONT ON THE AISNE, MAY 1918

(By Lieut.-General Sir Alexander H. Gordon)

The part taken by British troops in resisting the attack on the French positions north-west of Reims which began on May 27, and in ultimately bringing it to a standstill, can only be fully appreciated if the moral and physical state of the troops and the conditions under which they fought are understood and borne in mind. The IXth Army Corps had been engaged in the successful defence of the Kemmel ridge between April 9 and 21 on the northern part of the Battle of the Lys. In addition to the fighting qualities of the troops, success was due in this case to the unstinted supply of reinforcements sent by General Plumer, commanding the Second Army, as they were required and as they could be spared from other duties. The administrative staff of the Second Army was also indefatigable in providing ammunition, equipment, transport and food for the additional troops which were increasing the strength of the IXth Corps far beyond its normal figure. These frequent reinforcements were, moreover, invariably placed at the absolute disposal of the Corps Commander for use as and when the exigencies of the fight demanded ; they formed, in fact, a reserve in the proper tactical meaning of the word. The Second Army Intelligence also contributed to the ultimate success of the operations by the excellent information they collected and the correct forecasts which they often made of the enemy's probable intentions. In the matter of intelligence and reinforcements the Corps had ample cause for bitter disappointment in their next battle. When the IXth Corps

handed over the Kemmel position and its divisions withdrew from the trenches as they were successively relieved by French troops, all ranks felt that everything that was possible had been done to help them in the great effort they had made and to reduce their inevitable hardships to a minimum. The moral effect of this was good. The heavy losses they had suffered and the physical and mental exhaustion of the survivors in no way detracted from the satisfaction derived from success, the pleasure due to the relaxation of strained muscles and nerves, the freedom from anxiety and the joy of knowing that they were going to a quiet sector of the line to rest and to recuperate their strength. They were pleased with themselves and indulgently inclined towards the rest of the world.

The quiet sector in question formed part of the French front in Champagne, and its outpost line extended from Loivre, a village about five miles N.N.W. of Reims, to the eastern end of the Chemin-des-Dames about a mile west of Craonne. The Corps came therefore under the orders of General Duchêne, the French Army Commander of this part of the line. The Corps consisted of the 8th, 21st, 25th, and 50th Divisions, which began to arrive in the new area on April 27. These divisions, commanded respectively by Generals W. C. G. Heneker, D. G. M. Campbell, Sir E. G. T. Bainbridge, and H. C. Jackson, had been heavily engaged during the past month, three of them having been twice and one (25th) three times withdrawn from the battle line and again engaged after being reformed. They therefore had few experienced officers or men when they arrived in Champagne, and were again filled up by immature and half-trained lads fresh from home whose training had to be completed. In these circumstances the divisions could not be considered fit for heavy fighting for some time to come. Notwithstanding this, they were ordered into the front line almost at once by the French Commander, who countered the British objections by declaring that as the front was a quiet one and as no attack was expected it would be possible to continue the training of the troops while in the line and

that the French divisions, urgently required elsewhere, could thus be relieved.

In the meantime the Corps Commander and Staff studied the French schemes of attack and defence and the ground on which fighting might take place. They got into close touch with the members of the French Staff for Operations, Intelligence and Administration, and in conjunction with them prepared a scheme for the IXth Corps. The original orders had contemplated the employment of the IXth British Corps as a central reserve in the hands of the French Army Commander. When this was changed and the divisions were designated for the front line, the installations and depots considered necessary for the former duty were obviously quite inadequate for the latter. Nothing short of the most complete administrative arrangements for battle in a previously determined position could be considered satisfactory, and the IXth Corps Staff began immediately to carry out such dispositions and works as were essential for giving effect to the scheme of defence. Differences of opinion on fundamental points arose almost at once. The French seemed to consider their main line of defence to be practically impregnable mainly on account of the admirable disposition of their numerous machine guns. It is true that their scheme included alternative rear positions, but little work had been done on these positions to prepare them for occupation if required. On the other hand, working apparently on the assumption of impregnability, all their executive and administrative arrangements were disposed perilously near to the front line. All of the Divisional, Corps, and even the Sixth Army Headquarters were established at an average distance of from five to six miles from the main line of resistance. Similarly, many of the electrical communication centres, ammunition depots, supply railheads and casualty clearing stations were just as near to the front, and their vital functional activities could be—and in the event were—completely paralysed by a heavy bombardment. It was not possible to make any radical changes in these matters, as no heed was given to the experiences

already gained by the British in the recent Battles of the Somme and the Lys, but some supplementary arrangements were made, especially in regard to ammunition depots. It was, however, the tactical distribution of the troops which caused the greatest anxiety to the British commanders when they studied the scheme and examined the ground. With few exceptions the whole of the infantry was placed in the battle zone, the front line of which was called the main line of resistance, and they were ordered to maintain this line at all cost or to retake it if lost. In front of this was the advanced or outpost zone, which in most places was too strongly held for the principal duties of its garrison. Farther back lay the second position, to be held by Army reserve divisions but only to be occupied by nucleus garrisons when fighting began, the remainder being ordered to move forward in order to reinforce the battle zone troops or to counter-attack the enemy as occasion demanded. These orders concluded with pressing injunctions to corps commanders to distribute their troops in depth, but the earlier part of the orders which crowded the infantry into the forward positions made these instructions about distribution in depth seem somewhat inconsistent and, in any case, difficult to carry out. The general impression left in the minds of British officers after studying the scheme was that the main fighting force of the infantry was too near the front for freedom of action, and that its effective strength would be greatly reduced by inevitable losses caused by howitzer and trench-mortar bombardment, before it had an opportunity to use its rifles. In short, the best use was not being made of the principal arm of the defence.

The conditions of the ground south of the Aisne held by the 21st Division gave special prominence to these defects because a belt of impenetrable morass tangled with submerged tree and shrub roots, and through which the so-called canal finds its dubious way, lay right across the battle zone. Traversed only by three or four slender ' duckboard ' tracks, it rendered reinforcement or counter-attack from the western side practically impossible. The eastern side should have

been held only by outpost troops with permission to retire at the right time. General Campbell brought this several times to notice and begged for some modification of the scheme, but the French Higher Command would not agree to any alteration, and a French army commander's 'J'ai dit' is conclusive—to his subordinate, a corps commander, be he French or British. The procedure for a British corps commander to adopt in a serious case of disagreement had previously been arranged with the British G.H.Q., but it must be remembered that the 21st Division had only been in the line for twelve days before the German attack took place and, allowing for the time required to study their front, to discover defects in the scheme for its defence and to discuss them with the French Staff, it can be seen why the sudden onslaught of the enemy on May 27 settled the question and forced the British troops to fight under the French scheme without there having been a chance of getting it improved by a reference to G.H.Q., as was intended. In all other matters the French commanders and staff did all they could to meet the British demands, and the personal relations between the Allied forces were of the happiest description.

A corps commander has little opportunity for seeing behind the scenes in matters of high strategy. His opinion is only asked with reference to his own front, and curiosity on his part, if displayed, is seldom gratified. This is specially the case if he is far from his own G.H.Q. and serving under a foreign command. It is only from a study of the available Intelligence reports that any conclusion can be drawn by a subordinate commander about the probable intentions of the enemy. So far as an opinion could be formed from their own knowledge and judgment, the IXth Corps Commander and Staff considered that a German attack was not probable, but if it did take place they thought that it would be delivered in great force with the object of outflanking the Allied forces north of the Aisne, driving them towards the sea and thus preparing the way for a subsequent advance on Paris from a broad base. The IXth Corps Intelligence

service was working under the 2e Bureau (Intelligence) of the Sixth French Army, and looked to them for an opinion about the probability of attack, formed from their wider field of knowledge. They were pressed to give the British the benefit of such an opinion as frequently as they could. The suddenness of the surprise may be gathered from the following message which was received from French Headquarters on May 25 : 'In our opinion there are no indications that the enemy has made preparations which would enable him to attack to-morrow.'

On the morning of May 26 the troops of, and attached to, the IXth Corps were disposed as follows : 21st Division holding over 7500 yards of the front line from near the village of Loivre (held by the 45th French Division) to Berry-au-Bac on the Aisne, with H.Q. at Chalons-le-Vergeur ; 8th Division holding the next 10,000 yards round Cæsar's Camp and up to a point about half-way between Jouvincourt and Corbeny, with H.Q. at Roucy ; 50th Division another 8000 yards to the source of the river Ailette, where they joined hands with the 22nd French Division in the wooded valley lying north of the narrow steep-sided Craonelle plateau forming the eastern end of the famous Chemin-des-Dames. The 50th Division had their H.Q. at Beaurieux. Each of the divisions held the front line with all three of its brigades, and they were covered by their own divisional artilleries which, in the case of the 8th and 50th, were supplemented by three batteries each of French field-guns (75's). By permission of the Army Commander the 21st Division was also helped by the field batteries of the 25th Division which was in army reserve round Montigny. The 21st Division also had a French territorial battalion attached to it, and 8 or 9 French machine-gun companies were distributed among the three divisions. The British heavy artillery, comprising 10 heavy howitzers, 24 six-inch howitzers and 24 sixty-pounders, was assisted by about 100 French medium guns and howitzers placed at the disposal of the IXth Corps.

Such then were the conditions under which the battle

opened. The British regimental officers knew little, and the men nothing, of the difficulties and anxieties of the Higher Command. Recovering slowly from the exhaustion and losses sustained in Flanders, they were busy inculcating the lessons of their experience on the minds of the half-trained boys who had been sent to fill the gaps in the ranks ; teaching them the details of outpost duties, of the conduct of minor raids for the purpose of gaining information and of the manner of defeating the enemy's counter-raids. How great was the number of young officers and men undergoing this training may be judged from the fact that the four divisions of the corps had suffered an aggregate loss of 1600 officers and 35,000 men since March 21, *i.e.* in less than two months of alternate fighting and refitting.

After each failure to break through the Allied line the Germans exerted themselves to the utmost to achieve success in the next attempt. For this attack of May 27 they especially devoted themselves to ensuring secrecy, to making their trench-mortar bombardment of annihilating intensity, and to keeping the front line of their infantry at full strength by passing up reserve divisions to replace forward divisions as soon as these appeared to be failing to make progress. So perfect were their precautions for secrecy that no less than seven attacking divisions were assembled without discovery on a front held by only four on May 25, while four more were successively thrown in during the next few days of battle, making a total of eleven divisions which the British troops had to resist. The preliminary bombardment by trench mortars, howitzers and gas shells proved to be the most severe that had ever been experienced by the oldest soldiers present. For over three hours they had to endure a punishment which tried their fortitude and patience to the utmost ; maddened by the feeling that no active steps on their part could relieve the impatience with which they longed to rush out and use their rifles, sorely tried by the terror painfully apparent in some of the younger men and by the sufferings of the wounded for whom little could be done at the time, and partially

suffocated by the detested gas masks, it was only a high state of discipline which supported them during this terrible ordeal. No narrative or history can reproduce the individual feelings and emotions of the combatants such as those referred to above or those of commanders and staff trying to force their minds into that state of absolute imperturbability in which alone the brain can deal rapidly and effectively with an ever-changing situation and can decide on the best steps to be taken. A bare statement of the course of events is all that can be attempted, leaving it to the reader's imagination to envelop this literary skeleton with the flesh and blood of emotions, impulses and the local colour of minor incidents. Thus only can he obtain a picture full of vivid reality which may do justice to the heroism of the troops.

Early on May 26 two prisoners, taken by the French, gave the definite information that an attack on the Chemin-des-Dames and the IXth Corps front would be made on the morning of the next day, to be preceded by a bombardment of two or three hours commencing at 1 A.M. Orders were given for the troops to be in their battle positions by 7 P.M. and for the 25th Division in army reserve to move its three brigades to Guyencourt, Muscourt and Ventelay respectively. At midnight our artillery opened what is called counter-preparation fire designed to harass the assembly of the enemy's troops and to introduce as much confusion and difficulty as possible into his preliminary movements. At 1 A.M. the enemy's bombardment began as foretold, and lasted till 4.30 A.M., when his infantry left their trenches and the hand-to-hand fighting characteristic of a battle of positions gave vent to the pent-up feelings of our men, allowing them to use their rifles and their muscles.

The enemy at first made most progress on his right, being reported in Ailles (held by the 22nd French Division) and on the crest of the plateau by 5.15 A.M. while at the same time he was moving through Chevreux. This threatened the left of the 50th Division, and the 5th Yorks made a determined counter-attack on the eastern end of the Chemin-des-Dames. It was, however, unsuccessful and they were

overpowered. The Germans crossed the ridge and advanced so far that they began to enter the village of Beaurieux from the west and the 50th Division H.Q. had to make a hurried retirement. Farther to the right, by 6.30 A.M. they had gained ground towards Ville-aux-Bois, tanks being reported as accompanying this advance. A great struggle took place in defence of the ground rising behind this village, and it was not till about 8 A.M. that the defenders were surrounded and overwhelmed. Meanwhile the 8th Division were having a similar experience and were eventually forced off the high ground south of Juvincourt, down the valley of the Miette and off the ridge which separates that stream from the Aisne. The right brigade was indeed forced across the Aisne, blowing up the bridges behind it. The centre and left brigades were still north of the river, yielding ground inch by inch with such determination that one battalion, the 2nd Devons, was exterminated almost to a man. For this fine example the battalion, as a unit, was afterwards selected for the high honour of being mentioned in French Orders ('cité a l'ordre du jour') and awarded the Croix de Guerre which it may carry on its colours with justifiable pride. A similar honour was conferred on the 5th Battery 45th Brigade R.F.A. It fought its guns to the last until they were put out of action by hostile fire, when the remnants of the detachments, headed by their officers, made a vigorous counter-attack on the approaching Germans. Very few of this devoted band survived, but the French have perpetuated the memory of these valiant gunners in a specially appropriate manner worthy indeed of general adoption in the British Army.[1] Both these cases are typical of many others. The infantry could show numerous examples of equal heroism, and many of the batteries north of the Aisne had all their guns destroyed in action before moving a man to the rear. This accounts for the field-gun deficiencies in the 8th and 50th Divisions, which had

[1] It was adopted in the IXth Corps, among whose papers will be found the 'Records' of six units selected on this account. The word 'Recorded' was chosen so as to correspond with the French word 'Cité.'

to be made good by other batteries in the later stages of the battle.

By about 9 A.M. the situation north of the Aisne showed that the two divisions, helped by a battalion from the 25th, were still holding the ground covering the bridges near Pontavert, but elsewhere they had been forced to cross the river. The higher commanders knew, however, that the available reserves were insufficient to retrieve the situation by a counter-attack, and they prepared orders for the defence of the northern slopes of the Bouffignereux mountain and the plateau west of it. By 9 A.M. the 21st Division had been forced off the open ground east of the Aisne and Marne canal, which the Germans had succeeded in crossing, and heavy fighting was going on along the line of the main road (No. 44) and round the fortified points forming the line of redoubts just west of the road. The left of the division had begun to fall back in conformity with the retirement of the 8th Division right, and touch between the two divisions was maintained in a similar manner throughout the day. On its right the division kept touch with the magnificent 45th French Algerian Division (General Naulin), which loyally gave every assistance to our troops, as indeed they were able to do, not being heavily attacked on their own front. By noon, however, the attack proved to be overwhelming, and the 21st Division—the 45th conforming —had to fall back everywhere west of the canal.

By midday the Germans had made a large advance on the left of the Corps front and against the whole of the XIth French Corps of which the 22nd Division formed the right, with the 157th behind them. The Aisne had been crossed at many points owing to the failure of Sixth Army H.Q. to give the order to destroy the bridges in time. Higher up the river, where the destruction of some of the bridges had been left to the discretion of the British, this operation of vital importance had been carried out. The disorganisation due to the retirement and losses of the 8th and 50th Divisions and to the absorption into the fighting line of some of the 25th necessitated the issue of the orders already prepared.

These orders placed the brigades of the 25th Division and the battalion of Corps cyclists at the disposal of the three other divisions, whose areas of responsibility were also rearranged. The pressure on the front and left of the Corps showed, moreover, that a further retirement on this side might become necessary, and the Corps Commander accordingly warned General Campbell about noon that he should be prepared for a considerable change of his divisional front, pivoting on his right and swinging back his left so that his division should not be outflanked on its left or taken in reverse. The retirement would be carried out after nightfall should circumstances necessitate the issue of orders for such a movement. During the afternoon events led rapidly to the situation thus anticipated. The cyclist battalion and twenty-four guns of the Lewis gun school succeeded for a time in checking the enemy north of Fismes. Two battalions of a reserve French Division (13th), hurriedly brought up in lorries, were thrown in for the same purpose. The effect produced was not, however, sufficient to prevent the assembly near Muscourt of large masses of Germans, who advanced about 5 P.M. in a south-easterly direction up the northern slopes of the high ground overlooking the Ventelay–Romain valley. Seeing that this movement threatened to pierce the defence and envelop the centre and right of the line, every effort to stop it was made by the 74th Brigade (attached to 50th Division). Temporary success was achieved, but the uncertainty about a more permanent retention of this high ground decided the Corps Commander about 5.30 P.M. to issue the order of which the 21st Division had already been warned. By 7 P.M. the Germans had reached Fismes and Courlandon and though Romain and Ventelay were still in our hands it was plainly necessary to decide what the next position should be and how it was to be held.

When no reserve is available to enable him to take an active part in the conduct of a battle, a commander can only indicate to his subordinates, through his General Staff, the line of positions he wishes them to occupy and the steps

to be taken to keep touch with each other so as to maintain an even front. This was all that the General Staff side of Corps Headquarters, under Brigadier-General Maxwell Scott, could do on the present occasion and during the following day. On the other hand, the Administrative Staff have their energies taxed to the utmost at all times ; meeting immediate requirements in the supply of ammunition and food, and in the evacuation of the wounded ; anticipating future demands and making such preparations as shall facilitate adequate compliance when the time comes ; and regulating the transport of all these services in both directions on roads selected by the General Staff for tactical reasons. All this arduous work is of far greater immediate importance in the case of a retirement than in an advance, for failure in the latter calls a temporary halt in the movement, whereas in the former the enemy has the initiative and is not likely to sound the 'cease fire' while the deficiencies of his helpless opponents are made good. Added to this was the further complication of having to deal with the methods and organisation of another nation busy with the work of supply to its own troops. No failure occurred throughout the whole of this battle, and the recognition of this fact forms a high compliment to Brigadier-General Harding Newman and his subordinates of the Corps Administrative Staff.

The enemy maintained the pressure of his attacks during the night and small bodies penetrated under cover of darkness deep into our lines at various points. The 21st Division carried out their retirement in the most skilful manner up the steep wooded slopes of the Bouffignereux mountain, over which they withdrew their remaining guns and howitzers with most of the ammunition and stores required for them. By dawn the whole of the infantry had completed the difficult operation of wheeling back in the dark through a rough tangle of forest, pivoted on their right and keeping touch on both flanks, though they suffered some loss on their left. The new line taken up ran through Saint Aubœuf to Vadeville farm ; near there the 8th Division continued it along the crest lying south of the Ventelay–Romain

valley, at the end of which ridge they joined with the 50th Division. This line was rather farther back than had been ordered, because by this time the Germans had gained some ground. At a late hour on the previous evening General Breton, commanding 154th French Division, called at H.Q. to say that his division was on its way to the support of the IXth Corps, but, alas! he came back shortly afterwards to report that he had been ordered to the west where Sixth Army H.Q. thought that the 22nd and 157th Divisions required his help to a still greater extent. General Bouillon's 13th Division had also been summoned earlier in the day to assist at that part of the Allied front.

The daily progress made by the enemy along the whole front is shown on the attached outline sketch, the lines on which were copied from a captured German map. They are a fairly accurate representation of the course of the battle, and they seem to show either that the attack on the French portion of the front was heavier than that delivered against the British, or that the resistance met with on the British front was the more effective. A reference to letters from General Maistre, who commanded the northern group of armies (G.A.N.) in succession to General Franchet d'Espérey, show at any rate what were his views on the subject and the value he placed on the British resistance.

Early on the 28th the Saint Aubœuf–Breuil line was so heavily attacked, especially in the centre, that a further retirement of the troops was made to the next line selected for occupation, and Corps H.Q. moved from Jonchery to Romigny. The 21st Division, keeping close touch with the French on their right, gradually fell back to the spur between Trigny and Prouilly, after checking the enemy's advance by a great fight on the ridge north of Pevy. The 8th and 50th Divisions, greatly reduced in fighting strength, continued the line on the south bank of the Vesle to a point about two miles west of Jonchery. This movement was completed by 10 A.M. and the comparative lull which ensued was doubtless due to the enemy's preparations for crossing the river. This operation was begun about midday and

resulted in his capture of the high ground between the Vesle and the Ardre south-east of Fismes as far as the spur north of Vaudeuil. On this flank the French were making great efforts to save the situation by moving their 154th Division forward north of Crugny. The 21st British and the 45th French Divisions on the right were therefore enjoined to hold their ground to the uttermost in the hope of stemming any further advance of the onflowing tide. It soon became clear, however, that the German plan included a strong advance up both sides of the river Ardre with the probable object of gaining the high ground overlooking the Marne valley and thus covering the flank of a subsequent advance on Paris or of launching an eastward movement destined to encircle Reims and to cut off the French eastern group of armies. The enemy's advance up the Ardre valley was accordingly pressed with great vigour and was the cause of considerable anxiety and some local retirement. Every yard of ground was, however, so hotly contested that late at night the line which we still held ran roughly from the Vesle near Muizon, round the knoll west of the Jonchery–Savigny road and thence south-westward. But this strenuous resistance on the right, combined with the progress being made by the Germans on the left up the southern slopes of the Ardre valley towards Lhery, necessitated a gradual extension of the British front to the left which weakened the strength of the defence still more. Another result was that the 154th Division was in some confusion because part of it was fighting shoulder to shoulder with our troops north of the Ardre while the remainder was intermingled with the 13th Division on its left.

The organisation of the Allied forces in this area was evidently engaging the attention of French Headquarters at this time, for the IXth Corps was now transferred from the Sixth to the Fifth French Army and was included in the subordinate group command of a French general whose headquarters were unfortunately quite out of reach. Whatever value these changes may have had, it was clear that the organisation of command in the actual fighting line

required immediate attention. The IXth Corps Commander proposed that the troops north of the Ardre, including two battalions of the 154th Division, should be under General Heneker's orders, while those to the south should be commanded by General Breton. He at the same time placed the remnants of the 50th British Division under General Heneker's command. Before a decision about his proposal could be received, the situation near Lhery had, however, become so critical that in the early hours of the morning of the 29th General Breton appealed to the IXth Corps for help to close the gap which was being formed between his troops and the 13th Division. Fortunately the means for doing so were now available because a reserve of force was close at hand. During the night the 19th British Division (General G. D. Jeffreys) had been brought in omnibuses and lorries from the VIIIth British Corps near Chalons. They also had only just been sent to this 'quiet sector' to recuperate their strength after battles in which they had suffered losses as heavy as those of the divisions of the IXth Corps, but in the extreme urgency of the situation they had to be sent for just as they stood. The state of affairs was explained to General Jeffreys and he was given orders to advance to the line between Faverolles and Lhery and to get touch with the separated portions of the 154th Division on either flank. The IXth Corps Cyclist Battalion was directed to act as a screen of outposts for this deployment. The division was now forming up near the villages round Chaumuzy, but as soon as this was completed they began their advance, having two brigades in front and one in reserve. During the morning this movement had the desired effect of filling the gap and strengthening the weakest part of the line, though the 19th Division could not make as much ground as had been wished. On the right very persistent pressure on the 8th and 21st Divisions forced them back, first to the Rosnay–Faverolles crest and later to the high ground just south of Rosnay including the Bouleuse spur. The lost ground was hotly disputed, and important points on it were several times taken and retaken in the fluctuations

of the fight. For this purpose it had been necessary to call on General Jeffreys to part with the battalions which he was keeping as his divisional reserve. That night the line ran from Rosnay through Tramery to Lhery, the 45th French Division having agreed to be responsible east of Rosnay. French orders were received during the night for the relief of the 21st Division by the 154th French Division, though the remains of the 8th, 50th, and 25th, which were now combined under General Heneker's command, were much more exhausted and in greater need of relief. The Corps Commander was, however, not consulted.

The morning of May 31 found the situation unchanged except that the enemy was making good progress in his general advance towards the Marne valley between Dormans and Château Thierry, and was threatening the British left by his renewed efforts to cover this advance by securing the ridge on which Romigny stands. The dismounted 1st French Cavalry Corps was dealing with this threat. Elsewhere the comparatively quiet state of affairs was being used by our troops to consolidate their hastily entrenched line. The temporary lull in the fighting also afforded an opportunity for reconsidering the organisation of the Higher Command. Exclusive of the 21st Division in process of being relieved, the four other British divisions were so much reduced in numbers that their fighting strength was little more than that of a single division. They were therefore combined under the one command of General Jeffreys, whose 19th Division formed the greater part. At a meeting in Chaumuzy, whither the advanced headquarters of the IXth Corps had been moved from Romigny so as to be in closer touch with the varying conditions of the battle front, General Breton urged that the one British and two French divisions should be under one fighting command, which he thought should be British. Meanwhile the Commander of the French northern group of armies—General Franchet d'Espérey—had arrived at a somewhat similar conclusion in consultation with General Micheler, commanding the Fifth Army. The IXth Corps Commander, on his way to

the Fifth Army Headquarters to discuss these matters, met General d'Espérey, who told him that it had been decided to relieve the IXth Corps tired divisions, but that the 19th was to remain for the present. General Micheler gave further details, and said that the tactical command of the 19th British and the 28th (which had relieved the 45th) and 154th French Divisions would be taken over by General Pellé. This officer accompanied the Corps Commander on his return to Chaumuzy and took over the command of the front line troops, assisted by the General Staff officers of IXth Corps pending the arrival of his own staff.

For the next few days intermittent attempts were made to penetrate our line. A heavy tax was imposed on the remaining energy and strength of the troops by the severe though local fighting. This culminated on June 6 in two determined and well-prepared attacks on the so-called Montagne-de-Bligny, the key of the position held by General Jeffreys' force. (This force was from then onwards invariably referred to as the '19th Division,' though it actually represented the remains of the whole of the IXth Corps.) The first attack was beaten off by the British, whose right flank was, however, partially uncovered. This enabled the Germans to achieve success in their second attack, but the whole of the hill was almost immediately retaken by a well-conceived and brilliantly executed counter-attack made by the 1/4th King's Shropshire Light Infantry. By a simultaneous offensive movement the French on the right also recovered the ground they had lost in the first attack. These attacks on the Bligny position proved to be the last serious effort on the part of the Germans during the time the British held the line, and until they were relieved on June 19 by Italian troops.

The effect of the heavy strain which had been thrown on the troops since May 27, and which became proportionately greater during the first week of June, had been several times represented to French Headquarters. There were many indications, however, that the French attached great value to the moral as well as to the physical assistance rendered

by the presence of British troops in the line. The considerable number of exhausted men gradually withdrawn from the line and waiting in rear at Vertus compared unfavourably with the attenuated ranks still holding the trenches. This disparity in numbers attracted the attention of the French Staff, and great pressure was applied to obtain reinforcements for the front from the resting billets in rear. The British commanders, however, determined that no man should be sent up until he was really fit to resume an active part in the battle. Great efforts were made by all concerned to supply efficient drafts, for the anxiety of the French was very evident though it led them to count heads only, whereas it was British hearts that were needed so sorely. The net result was, however, very satisfactory from the French point of view, as may be shown by a letter from General Maistre in which he wrote : ' Avec une ténacité, permettez-moi de dire, toute anglaise, avec les débris de vos divisions décimées, submergées par le flot ennemi, vous avez reformé, sans vous lasser, des unités nouvelles que vous avez engagées dans la lutte, et qui nous ont enfin permis de former la digue où ce flot est venu se briser. Cela, aucun des témoins français ne l'oubliera.'

The story of the share which the British troops took in the battle could not have been more pithily summed up than in the words ' former la digue,' and, as General Maistre pointed out in another letter, it was this barrier which enabled Marshal Foch to take full advantage at the end of July of the deep pocket in the French line formed by the enemy's attempt to break through in May.

BOOK III

THE ADVANCE TO VICTORY

CHAPTER I

AN ALTERCATION; AND ITS RESULT

THE seven months of initiative, which the Germans had held on the Western Front, ended in July 1918, and at once the advance of the Allies to victory began. So this is not an unsuitable occasion for referring to the myth that when, in the summer of 1918, the British troops advanced triumphantly they did so because at length they were directed by consummate skill or genius—and that this skill or genius did not emanate from our own Higher Command and Army leaders, but from Marshal Foch. That aspersion on British leadership was described in an early page of this book as the greatest myth in the war as far as the Western Front is concerned. Some people *on now learning the facts of 1918* will be tempted to describe it as the greatest lie in the war: however, the milder term may be more fitting, for the aspersion on British leadership sprang—in the main—out of ignorance rather than malice.

There was untruth, with meanness, certainly in speeches, etc., in this country, in which French military skill was exalted, whilst that of the British leadership was overlooked: even so, this untruth and meanness sprang in the main from ignorance. More and more one is convinced when examining the evidence that the civilian authorities at home in August and September 1918 did not understand the nature of Sir Douglas Haig's wonderful series of operations; and that they possessed at hand nobody really able or ready to help them in this.

In the chapters which follow, the start and finish of the British offensive against the German centre from August onward are described fully by Colonel Boraston. So here we need only touch in broad outline on the situation

when the German initiative ended. In the latter half of July 1918 French and American divisions counter-attacked the Germans, threw them back, and took from Ludendorff the initiative. On August 8[1] the British, in turn, struck on the Amiens front and threw the Germans back on to their 1916 line south of the Somme, roughly the Roye–Chaulnes line. As a result of this attack, as the Despatch shows, the Paris–Amiens railway was disengaged, the connection between the French and British Armies at length quite secured, and the enemy's junction at Chaulnes brought within our gunfire.

Such was the immediate result of the fighting between August 8 and August 11. The question then arose, could we with advantage continue this operation south of the Somme and by a fresh frontal attack rout the Germans still further and force them eastwards across the devastated area and over the river, winning back from them Péronne, etc. ? To satisfy himself as to this, Haig went from his head-quarters on the night of August 10 to the 32nd Division, as the *Despatches* tell us. He studied the situation, and found that the position on the Roye–Chaulnes front was most formidable. Clearly the German resistance had stiffened here. He came to the conclusion that an attack in this area by the British would be clumsy and unsound.

Next night Foch visited British G.H.Q. He requested Haig to attack the enemy in this Roye–Chaulnes position at once. He was anxious to secure Péronne if possible, with the river crossings to the south of the town and the high ground east of it.

In order to make perfectly sure that the view he had reached about this German position was the correct view, the British Commander-in-Chief ordered further reconnaissances on August 13. These bore out entirely his conclusion. Therefore it was necessary to write to Foch, state the facts,

[1] Other possible attacks by the British had been discussed—for instance, one with the object of recovering Kemmel Hill lost by the French in April. But the British Commander-in-Chief decided on the Amiens attack as the most promising.

and let it be known that he was not prepared to attack the Roye–Chaulnes position.

At the same time Haig outlined another and quite different plan of attack: one starting farther north, in which the Third and Fourth Armies would be able to co-operate, and the First Army a little later to join in. He preferred science to the sledge-hammer.

Foch did not concur. He was bent on the Fourth British Army continuing and pressing the attack forthwith south of the Somme. So a conference between the leaders was necessary. It was held at once at Sarcus, and attended by Foch and Haig with their Chiefs of Staff. The two proposals were considered. No secret shall here be made of the fact that the argument was keen and controversial. How could it be otherwise, seeing that both leaders believed absolutely that their respective proposals—which were of a wholly divergent character—were right? Compromises may be advantageous and practicable between military leaders, as among statesmen, when minor methods clash. But compromise, or a patchwork, was out of the question here, though the leaders were on excellent relations with each other, and though their broad war aims were identical. Both, it is true, wished to continue the advance and force the enemy back before he had time to recover from the defeat on August 8 and the following days: but their methods of doing this were utterly different.

The discussion continued.

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The British Commander-in-Chief in the end definitely declined to continue the attack on the Roye–Chaulnes position. He perceived it would be playing into the hands of the Germans who were on their guard there and strongly entrenched. A few paragraphs from the official Despatch of December 21, 1918, indicate the position:—

'During the following days [*i.e.* after August 8-9] our operations continued successfully in close co-operation with the French. By the evening of August 12 our infantry had reached the German Somme defences of 1916, on the

general line west of Damery, east of Lihons, east of Proyart, having repulsed with severe loss determined counter-attacks in the neighbourhood of Lihons. North of the Somme we were on the western outskirts of Bray-sur-Somme.

'Montdidier had fallen to the French two days earlier, and on the whole front from the Oise river to the Roye road at Andéchy our Allies had made deep and rapid progress.

'On the night of August 12, as has been seen, our advance east of Amiens had reached the general line of the old Roye–Chaulnes defences. The derelict battle area which now lay before our troops, seared by old trench lines, pitted with shell holes, and crossed in all directions with tangled belts of wire, the whole covered by the wild vegetation of two years, presented unrivalled opportunities for stubborn machine-gun defence. . . . I therefore determined to break off the battle on this front.'

With the two leaders holding diametrically opposed views as to how the offensive should continue, a position arose like that of July 3, 1916, when Joffre insisted we must renew at once our attack on the Thiepval shoulder, and Haig wholly differed and had plans for attacking elsewhere. In both instances there was, unquestionably, an awkward hitch. On the face of it, the British leader might appear to have been on somewhat stronger ground in 1916 in that his command was then an independent one ; though, as a fact, throughout that period it was always his desire to fall in with Joffre's views, in order to ensure unity of action between the Allies. But really his position was the same in both cases, for the British leader was not a whit less responsible for the army under him in 1918 than he had been in 1916. He had in 1918, it is true, a right of appeal to the British Government, if he could not agree with the French leader in a matter of great importance affecting the safety of his troops. But the idea that such an appeal in the midst of an offensive would prove practicable cannot be taken seriously : in such a contingency one might almost as well recommend for the purpose a set debate in, say, the British or French Parliament.

Therefore at this very awkward juncture the military leaders had, somehow, to decide this question between each other without resort to their respective governments. And this they ultimately did.

Foch accepted in its entirety the British Commander-in-Chief's plan.

He abandoned his order that the British Army should attack the Roye–Chaulnes position. He eventually promised to attack simultaneously with the French Army over a wide front in order to work in with Haig's plan, which was to start in a new sector. And there is reason for saying that, not long after, the French Higher Command admitted that it was beholden to us in this vital matter—as truly it was! That is what one expects in good soldiers: it is deep in their training.[1]

Before leaving this question, a remark made by a friend on hearing of it for the first time may be mentioned—'Well, it speaks very highly for Foch that ultimately he gave way, and accepted the British plan of operations.' It does. Judgment in war, as in statesmanship, imposes on leaders accommodation of this kind. Sometimes the accommodation in Allied warfare, as in statecraft, has to be reached with those whom you cannot place faith in, and whose proposal you believe to be unsound: sometimes with those in whom you can place faith, though you do not like their proposal and believe your own to be better. February 27-28, 1917, at Calais and August 1918 at Sarcus are illustrations in point.

In both two great soldiers, in the former case the British leader, in the latter the French leader, had to accommodate themselves to the situation in order to serve the Allied cause.

In the former the British Commander-in-Chief was instructed by the British Government, which was in liaison

[1] In a note read on June 11, 1918, at the conference at Paris, the British Commander-in-Chief had stated: 'It is my firm resolve to do all I can to assist General Foch, short of imperilling the British Army.' That was the line throughout. But by attacking the Roye–Chaulnes position the British Army would have been imperilled, quite unnecessarily, and Foch would not have been assisted.

with the French Government in the matter, that he must accept the directions of Nivelle, or be removed from his office (this alternative was not stated but it was implied). Now, he could not have full faith in those who made this demand, and moreover he, like Pétain and other leading French soldiers, did not believe in Nivelle's scheme. But he showed his judgment by setting self aside and accommodating himself to the situation. What happened ? He was soon after able to do a good deal to retrieve the blunder of the British Government and to bring an impulsive Generalissimo to reason. As a result, the British Army was not jeopardised ; or placed in the undignified position it would have been if its Commander-in-Chief had flung up his position, through motives of self-pride, in February 1917 and thereby given place to one who would naturally have acted as the agent of Nivelle and Nivelle's Staff. One of the first evil results of Haig's resignation would, as we have indicated, have been the abandonment in whole or part of the Chantilly arrangement to secure Vimy Ridge : for Nivelle and the French Government behind him would not have tolerated ' any nonsense of that kind ' from one who had been put in Haig's place to obey the new French Generalissimo. Haig, by accommodating himself to an exceptionally disagreeable situation, saved that.

Foch twice had to accept a situation he disliked. In June 1918, at the Paris Conference, whilst protesting that, as Generalissimo, he could not have his orders questioned, he did with excellent sense and comradeship agree that no British divisions should be removed until orders had passed through the hands of the British Commander-in-Chief and been assented to by him. That was a comparatively small matter, and the propriety of the reminder too obvious to be overlooked. Still, a leader over-careful of his own dignity or full of pride of place might at least have talked of resignation.

The Sarcus situation in a way was more difficult for Foch, in a way it was easier. It was more difficult because he attached the highest importance to his own plan of opera-

tions, and was resolutely set on it, whereas Haig's plan utterly differed from it. It was easier because the controversy was confined to a few soldiers. Civilian powers, with their *entourage*, were not present even to look on, much less to butt in with questions about military operations which they could not be expected to study even perfunctorily at such short notice. Imagination boggles at the idea of the question where we should attack the Germans on this occasion being conducted through a sort of Compiègne Conference like that of April 6, 1917, in which not only the French Government would make speeches and put questions but the British into the bargain.

With Compiègne in one's mind, it is appalling to think of what might have been the result of an appeal by either of the leaders to the civil power in August 1918. To dismiss Haig immediately after the Battle of Amiens, Germany's 'black day,' would have been hardly practicable, even assuming the War Cabinet to be, as in 1917, in the mood: but how could it have been exactly in the mood to do so when it was harassing itself and him over the question of questions, British casualties, and he had just rejected Foch's proposal which must incur heavy casualties without gain? On the other hand, what would Foch, and with him the French Government, have thought, how would they have acted, if the British Government had backed up its own Commander-in-Chief?

It is conceivable that after a great deal of talk the question might have been shelved for a time. But then what about the Germans, and about getting on with the advance?

An appeal to the power behind the soldiers at such a juncture would have been as serviceable as an appeal to the Germans. Beauvais would not have been beneficent in mid-August 1918—necessary though it was as a precaution and warning.

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As to the British Commander-in-Chief's plan. This might, for short, be referred to as the Battle of Bapaume; and that was as successful as the Battle of Amiens. But actually the

plan was far more than the Battle of Bapaume. When we examine the plan we discover, in regularly defined logical sequence, the whole of that magnificent series of operations which in October forced the enemy to give up his central and most powerful positions in France, turned the war into a war of movement, enabled French and Americans to advance on Mézières; and, with an almost incredible rapidity, brought the downfall and submission of the German Army.

The grand design of these operations by our First, Third and Fourth Armies—really all one battle, though for convenience we divide them up into several battles—has not been realised as it deserves to be by the public. But that does not argue want of intelligence or gratitude in the public. The explanation is that our people have never had the facts put fairly before them. No statesman has done so. What may be the motive or mixed motives for such abstention, one cannot say. Few, possibly, among our civilian administrators during the war had time or facilities to study the operations in 1918. Still less have those parliamentary speakers studied the operations who still repeat the parrot cry that the British Prime Minister 'won the war'; some of them varying this, when he does not come up to their political expectations, by declaring that he 'won the war and lost the peace.'

If some statesmen cared to look into the subject at all closely, they may have feared to offend the French by drawing the attention of the British public to the brilliancy and soundness of our military leadership in France. Something might be said for that line of caution or national self-denial in 1918. But since then in regard to Germany, in regard to Poland, in regard to Russia, in regard to Greece, and in regard to Turkey, we have adopted, sometimes no doubt rightly and sometimes wrongly, lines of action and argument far more calculated to offend French susceptibilities than would be a fair account of the manner in which German resistance was broken at its centre by British skill and forethought. It is significant that not one of the

innumerable outbursts against Great Britain in the French press during the last two years or so has related to any claim made on behalf of British military leadership in the war. All these wrathful outbursts have related to charges of bad faith and misconduct against British statesmen in overlooking French interests since the war.

Some French writers have made absurd claims as to 1918, attributing almost every British success to inspired French leadership. But that does not prove the French nation as a whole would have taken offence if British statesmanship had dared, or cared, since the war to relate the truth about the operations on the British front between August and November 1918, and to apportion the praise fairly and temperately. It is possible the French nation would have welcomed a few pages of inner history and truth in this matter : and that the Entente might have been eventually strengthened, not weakened, thereby.

The British Commander-in-Chief's plan for continuing and driving home the offensive against the German centre was not adopted as a hasty alternative upon finding that the French desired us to push on at once, and that Foch's method of doing so—*i.e.* of attacking the Roye–Chaulnes position—was crude and defective. On the contrary, parts of the British plan had been discussed among the British leaders for some time past. Gradually it was visualised and elaborated as the operations of and after August 8 proceeded.[1] Haig perceived that all which was necessary before breaking off the operations south of the Somme at a point where they threatened to grow very costly to us and infructuous was that the enemy junction at Chaulnes should be within our gun-fire. This gained, we ought to turn off and surprise the enemy again by an attack on the German front north of the Ancre. Foch and his staff had not grasped this fact.

[1] Was it Frederick the Great who remarked that we should all be great generals if we knew as much before a great battle as after it ? Well, British leadership, of course, did not *know* before the Battles of Bapaume and the Scarpe all it knew after them, but certainly it managed to foresee a surprising amount.

The prime necessity was to surprise the Germans, as we had succeeded in doing on August 8. How was this to be effected ? Surprise could certainly not be hoped for if at this stage we went blundering into action south of the Somme. We needed, besides the element of surprise, ground suitable for the use of tanks ; and the Roye–Chaulnes position, pocked with shell holes, was not suited to tanks.

We also needed good observation and high ground to strike from. Foch's plan lost sight of these facts.

The British Commander-in-Chief had looked north of Albert on the front held by the right of the Third Army, and found there the ground and the conditions he wanted. During the offensive of March-April the Germans, it will be recalled, had forced that army back to a line just west of the Ancre between Albert and Beaumont Hamel. Thence the line, when it stabilised early in April, ran north-east to the Scarpe near Arras. It was not the old German 1916 line between the Ancre and Scarpe, though, as seen on a small-scale map, there appears not much difference between the two lines. Actually, there was a substantial difference, and that difference distinctly against the Germans. Thanks to the greater strength of the left of the British battle front during the March offensive the enemy was unable to re-establish the advantageous position enjoyed by him in 1916 between Beaumont Hamel and Arras. We held, at the end of the German offensive of March-April 1918, the plateau about Bucquoy and Ablainzevelle, which the Germans had held in 1916. On March 26 the Germans heavily attacked our positions in this area, and again on March 28. They were completely repulsed. As pointed out in the Despatch, we were now astride or to the east of the intricate system of German trench lines which in 1916 we had to attack frontally. A successful attack started at this point, and striking south-east, would turn the line of the Somme. It promised splendid results : and, as the Commander-in-Chief has recorded in the despatch, it would be a step forward toward the strategic objective of St. Quentin–Cambrai.

When we collect the information and study it, with the map in front of us, uncommonly easy is it to understand why Haig preferred his own plan to that of striking at the Germans where they expected us and had greatly strengthened their front against us and where the ground was all in their favour.

On August 21 Haig put the preliminary stages of his plan into execution. He had arranged that the opening stroke should be of a limited character and should gain the line of the Arras–Albert railway where we believed—rightly—that the main enemy line of resistance was sited. August 22 was to be devoted to bringing up our troops and artillery for an attack on this line. On August 23, the Third Army would make its chief attack with those divisions of the Fourth Army which were in line north of the Somme. The rest of the Fourth Army was to push forward south of the Somme to cover the flank of the attack.

Some people may remember reading the sentiment of quite a famous critic of British leadership at this period—What a comfort it should be, he pointed out, for the nation to know now, at last, there was 'a mind' at the back of the operations being conducted on our front! A sentiment impeccable, save for the flaw that its author, applauding the operations which turned the line of the Somme, dislodged the enemy from his strong positions south of the river—and almost immediately led on to the breaking of the Drocourt–Quéant line—forgot or never knew who was the originator of these same operations, who *was* the 'mind' in question. Our critic thought that Foch had done it all. He had never heard of Roye–Chaulnes—or of Sarcus.

He erred not through ill-nature but simply because he did not know that this series of operations had a purely British origin. He thought they were French genius.[1]

[1] All that our accomplished critic was at this time prepared to acknowledge in the good stolid old leaders of the British Army was some skill in what he described as 'minor tactics.' Such was the kind of fodder on which in August and September 1918 the British public at home was being fed.

That amazing error has more or less thriven ever since. It has obtained—one is tempted to say it has been treasured—in this country and in other countries because the origin of the Battle of Bapaume and the operations which followed in September and October 1918 has been unknown. The error, let us hope, is now corrected—and the widespread mischief it has caused. It should have been ended by the Prime Minister in 1919 when the Commander-in-Chief and his Army Commanders were the subject of a vote in Parliament. This could have been done without the least slight to Foch and to the French nation. The present writer was struck one day by seeing the photograph of Clémenceau sent as a gift to one of his allies, and on this photograph were written a few words to the effect that some day history would record the truth about the work of British leadership in France. Certainly a great deal in war must be left to history. History, a progressive science, has not yet finished even with the British and French wars of more than a century ago. But, in regard to the origin in August 1918 of the series of strokes which broke the German centre, it is unnecessary any longer to suppress or defer the truth.

To attribute the credit for these battles to Foch is not really to honour Foch. What should we think if the French were to affect that the main credit of their defence at Verdun between February and July 1916 should be attributed to British leadership? Yet that would be not a more grotesque travesty of truth than the fiction that in August 1918 and onward Haig depended on and succeeded through French skill or genius.

That fiction, rightly viewed, is an insult to Foch and to the dignity and intelligence of the French nation.

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Haig's new offensive with the Third Army at once began to achieve what he intended and what he and his Staff and Army Commanders had thoroughly studied well beforehand. He attacked, as a preliminary, between Moyenneville and Miraumont on a short front on August 21, and reached the line of the Arras–Albert railway, securing the positions he

required for launching, two days later, his main attack. A day was spent in bringing up the troops and material; and then on August 23, from Lihons south of the Somme—the point of junction with the French—to the Mercatel spur south of Arras a great battle was joined on a thirty-three miles' front. The Fourth Army, as well as the Third, was striking again, and within the next few days we passed from success to success. The Germans counter-attacked, and their machine gunners—a *corps d'élite*, as the Commander-in-Chief had described them to the War Cabinet early in the year—in many instances resisted our tanks to the end. This resistance increased as we approached the Drocourt–Quéant and Hindenburg positions. But the British troops were not to be denied. The French Higher Command was keenly desirous to push forward; it recognised the immense power and skill in this British stroke; and Haig, now that opposition to his own scientific and far-reaching plans had been wisely and completely withdrawn, wished to meet that desire to the full. He had issued, as recorded in the despatch, a special note of directions to his army, calling for boldness and resolution, and for continuous pressure whenever the enemy was found to be relaxing.

This note emphasised the new and favouring conditions under which we were now advancing—an important point one must return to.

It is disappointing that we have not yet had any analysis, indeed hardly anything worth mentioning as a sketch, of these operations from authoritative German sources. Ludendorff is invaluable in his account of the offensives of 1916 and 1917 in the west, and often he is perfectly frank. But when he reaches the August 1918 period he becomes meagre, uninforming. Having admitted that August 8 was the black day for Germany, he finds neither space nor inclination to describe adequately the masterful British offensive that followed. His memories become discursive. He moves from front to front, so that any reader who thereafter trusts to his account must get a jumbled idea of the war in the west, and get it out of perspective. He

emphasises in one passage—is inclined to over-emphasise—the effect of the tanks on his troops : in another passage he makes light of the American attacks—not doing justice to their courage. Whilst, at a meeting of German civilian and military leaders at Berlin on October 17, 1918, he did not conceal from his audience the fact that the German Army took the British Army most seriously. But anything in the nature of an illuminating criticism, favourable or unfavourable, of this British plan which broke his centre is absent from Ludendorff's books.

The most he has told us so far is that the operations formed 'a series of attacks on Crown Prince Rupprecht's sector which lasted almost uninterruptedly to the end of the war and made the heaviest demands on the Group Headquarters and their Armies.' That is the truth certainly, but not very illuminating in a great strategist.

But did Ludendorff at the time he prepared his *War Memories* fully appreciate the plan ? It is, to say the least, doubtful.[1] He admits he could not make out what we were driving at strategically in April 1917 when we launched our attack at Arras. So that it is not unreasonable to suppose that he could not put together the various parts of the puzzle when, for instance, in September 1918 we struck again in the Arras area with the First Army.

The arrival of that army on the scene to join the Third and Fourth is an intensely interesting episode in the drama. As indicated, the British Commander-in-Chief had visualised it well before the conference at Sarcus.[2] Our design was to

[1] Ludendorff remarks of the attack on August 21, that the Seventeenth German Army had fallen back in time, and therefore the British failed before the first line : also, that the first two days went well for the Germans. He evidently did not recognise, when he wrote, that the opening British attack was intended to be but a light preliminary stroke. He says the depth of our penetration, as the operations developed, was soon known, 'but not the length of front to be attacked' ; and that, consequently, there was a danger of local commanders throwing in their troops 'too hurriedly and piecemeal.' This was exactly what we aimed at !

[2] Sarcus and Dury are only a few miles apart. It is curious to reflect that in these insignificant spots there took place between leaders of great armies, respectively in March and August 1918, two of the most momentous conferences in the history of war.

surprise, and, by means of successive strokes on a gradually widening front, to perplex the enemy as to where we meant to deal him a crushing blow. Could we succeed in this, he would probably be driven into using up his still powerful reserves in scattered portions to avert a sudden and threatening blow now here now there by the three British Armies engaged. And that is what occurred. The enemy, mystified and alarmed by our scheme of operations, flung in his reserves piecemeal; portions of a division being in some instances hurried to one part of the battle front whilst another portion of the same division was despatched to a different sector.

A full account of how the series of battles, started by the small and modest-looking operation on August 21, led on to the storming of the Drocourt–Quéant and the Hindenburg positions, will be given in the chapter that follows. Here no more need be said about the operations than that they did all their originator had hoped, and ultimately enabled the Allied Armies as a whole to advance. It is true that on August 31, ten days after the Battle of Bapaume had started, and when confidence was general through the Allied Armies, a discordant note was struck; the authorities at home sending a warning message to the Commander-in-Chief. That, if acted upon, would have stopped the rapid advance to victory, discouraged the triumphant mood of our troops, and have strained to the breaking-point the relations of the two leaders. But, as we have seen, it was not acted on, and the operations according to plan continued.

In earlier chapters something has been said about a constant charge against our leadership on the Western Front—that it was without imagination, without vision. This is an appropriate place to reconsider these charges: appropriate at least from the point of view of people who can discern imagination and true vision in the planning and carrying out of the British operations in August and September onwards. There is, of course, no arguing with the man who contends that in 1918, as in 1916 and 1917, British leadership was without imagination and vision.

He prefers to remain purblind. But few who condemned the British offensives of 1916 and 1917 as unintelligent and brutal would care to extend their censure to this 1918 period. For one thing, the 1918 offensive was a great and obvious success—and not many critics of military—or other—operations care to condemn an obvious success! For another thing, now that it can be stated absolutely, once and for all, that this success in the summer and autumn of 1918 was planned out in principle and in detail by British leadership and by no other leadership the ground is taken from under their feet.

But there may still be left people who, accepting the hard facts about the purely British origin of these operations, and admitting there was skill and vision therein, will deplore the campaigns of the previous years. Seeing that Ludendorff's armies could by exact skill and prevision be thus shattered at the centre in 1918 by our troops, why in 1916-1917, they may lament, fight a long series of battles, costly, indecisive ?

The reply, of course, is that the operations of 1918 could not possibly have been carried out in that year had they not been preceded by those of 1916 and 1917, or by operations fought on similar lines. The condition of the enemy's troops had changed by the summer of 1918—the inevitable result of the 1916 and 1917 struggles.

It is conceivable, of course, that a decision might have been reached in the first half even of 1917 through the Battle of the Somme had the arrangements of the Chantilly Conference been adhered to instead of being exchanged for the Nivelle plan ; whilst some still believe, in spite of the failure of the Aisne battle, that, had that plan in its turn not been abandoned, the Allies might have advanced to victory early in 1918 instead of being almost crushed in the first half of that year. That is a contention, however, in the optative mood. Less and less it fails to convince us when we consider the immense strength of the Germans in the earlier period ; the misfortunes in 1917 within the French Army as evidenced by both the military and civilian chiefs of that nation ; the Italian disaster ; the loss of Russian aid.

True, the changes in the Allied plans and commands after the Somme led to loss of time, troops, confidence. The Nivelle affair, as it turned out, was a disaster brought about by incompetent civilian counsel and intrigue ; and we were fortunate in escaping from it as we did. But, when the last word has been said on that score, there remains the fact of an immense enemy strength, preparation, resolution, to dispose of.

Breaking the centre of the enemy's forces, and bringing him quickly to submission in the earlier period can be conceived of provided a sufficient change in the enemy moral is postulated. Such a change was almost effected at the end of 1916. But thereafter the whole plan of the Allied campaign and strategy was changed, and we flung away our chances and, thanks to the French Government and the British War Cabinet, drifted into the bad Aisne scheme.

The British operations of August and September 1918 onwards were magnificent in conception and execution. They reflect the highest credit alike on our troops and leadership. But the German Army, though still very powerful in 1918, was not in moral what it had been when we were compelled to engage it in the earlier and wearing-down period. The evidence of its leaders and our leaders and Intelligence is well enough agreed as to this. Nor had the German Army the full support in Germany it had enjoyed earlier. It had gone ' all out ' for a decision by its spring offensive, and had failed to achieve one—a great discouragement.

The outstanding reason, then, why we could reach a decision in the late summer and autumn of 1918 and could not do so by our offensives in 1916 and 1917 must be sought in the moral, at these different periods, of the enemy. There was no way of avoiding the wearing-out stage, as the final Despatch points out : and until we had seen it through and got, unquestionably, the upper hand in moral we could not strike home. The notion of those who turn in horror from that costly middle stage is that by great ingenuity in tactics and strategy, such as was exercised in 1918, we could have

surprised and broken the Germans without launching vast offensives against them in 1916 and 1917. No doubt our tactics were far in advance in the last year of the war of what they had been in the earlier period. We learnt through action, and progressed, as did the Germans and the French : and the progress would have been surer and speedier if our leader's constant wish to give the new army better training facilities had been met. But, even suppose the Commander-in-Chief had been able to concentrate on training to the extent he wished to do, granted better support from home, we could not have avoided this *période d'usure.* Napoleon, it has been suggested, would, faced with a trench war on this vast scale, somehow have got round the enemy and reached a speedy decision. Recalling Napoleon's experiences in, for instance, 1812 scarcely encourages one to believe that he would thus have made light of the impediments to an early victory in this war on the Western Front. After all, were the difficulties in the way of his highly trained, professional army in Russia in 1812 so much more overwhelming than those which faced our civilian army in France in 1916-1917 and in the early months of 1918 ? Through ' a continuous battle front . . . from Switzerland to the sea, outflanking was made impossible and manœuvres very difficult,' and frontal attacks were quite unavoidable. ' So long as the opposing forces are at the outset approximately equal in numbers and moral, and there are no flanks to turn, a long struggle for supremacy is inevitable.' [1] The Napoleonic legend—is it not a trifle overdone ?

As regards, by the way, the application of the word ' costly ' to the British offensives of 1916 and 1917, it should not be inferred thereby that final and victorious strokes, however brilliantly planned and carried out, are necessarily light in casualties. Our own casualties between the start of the British offensive at the Battle of Amiens on August 8 and November 11, 1918, amounted to 345,100.[2] Ingenious amateurs, apt to suppose that in war heavy casualties can

[1] *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches,* pp. 322-323. [2] See Appendix III.

be avoided by brilliant leadership, should bear such figures in mind.

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As a result of these victories in August and early September the British Commander-in-Chief resolved to bring the whole striking power of his army to bear on the retreating enemy. He was 'out' for a decision, and believed that it could be reached before the close of the year. This view had not previously been held, certainly not been pressed as a serious proposition by responsible people. The loss by the Germans of the initiative they had possessed during the first half of 1918, and exercised with such power between March and mid-July, far from indicated their submission and the end of the war within the second half of the year. After losing the initiative in 1915 they had been able to settle down to a defensive on the Western Front; whilst the passing of the initiative to the Allies in 1915 left us a long way from victory. The initiative, in fact, had fluctuated throughout the struggle in France. The defeat inflicted on the German Army by Foch's excellent stroke on July 18 did not bring a decision in 1918 within view either of ourselves or of Ludendorff; nor even the opening British stroke in front of Amiens almost immediately after. The plans of the Allies at that time leave us in no doubt as to this. These plans were simply for a vigorous, hard-thrusting campaign now that the Allies had sufficient forces for following up, whenever practicable, a disconcerted enemy.

But the continuous success of the operations which started on August 8, and led swiftly to the co-operation and general advance of our Third, Fourth, and First Armies, brought what had hitherto been only remotely possible into the sphere of reality. The War Cabinet had given the British leader to understand it was not desirable to take large risks: the war organisation at home would be ready for the necessary operations in 1919.[1] He was not, however, at all

[1] How many hundreds of millions of pounds would have been added to the British War Debt had Haig stopped his plans for an attack on the Hindenburg Line when, on August 31, 1918, he received a deterrent message from the civilian authorities? It is a curious point. Supposing

in favour of postponement. He had come to the reasoned conclusion that the war could now be won in a short time ; and he was ready to co-operate with entire confidence and heartiness with Foch, who was for striking continuously at the retreating German Army.

At the end of August and early in September the two leaders discussed the strategic aims for their future operations. Before this date Foch's plan of campaign had been of a quite limited character, consisting mainly of possible strokes for freeing several important railways, such as the Paris–Amiens line which the battle of August 8 secured. But now the moment had come, as we shall find in a later chapter, to enlarge and co-ordinate the operations in order to reach a decision. Foch's plan had been that the American Army, after an attack in the St. Mihiel salient, should pass thence to an offensive against the enemy in the Briey coal-fields ; the French themselves attacking in Champagne ; and the British advancing against the German centre at the Cambrai–St. Quentin front ; whilst British, French and Belgian forces combined were to attack in Flanders and advance towards Ghent with the object of clearing the Belgian coast-line.

The design was full of fighting spirit, but it was crude. The American forces in moving eastward towards the Briey coal-fields would be engaging in a drive away from the Allied centre and left ! It is not quite easy to-day to regard this Briey coal-fields trip quite seriously—nevertheless it was meant so at the time. It would mean an eccentric rather than a concentric movement against the enemy, and would render his retirement far easier and safer. Such was the British criticism of the plan. Haig preferred, and proposed, that the Allied right should, instead, attack and advance towards Mézières, the American right resting on the Meuse. In this manner the offensive of the whole Allied forces would be of a converging nature.

Foch, as shown in an earlier chapter, concurred with this

that Haig had checked his operations and the war had continued till, say, the spring of 1919, we should obviously have been compelled to spend another thousand millions or so

British emendation; and on September 3 he issued his Directive 3537 on these lines. The whole Allied plan of operations thus took a grand and really scientific form.

Six days later—after a conference between the two leaders to settle details for the advance in the north towards Ghent—Haig went to London. On September 10 he told the Government that the character of the struggle on the Western Front had now radically changed owing to the immense and victorious operations of the British forces in the battles of Amiens, Bapaume, and the Scarpe. He said he looked for a decision, and believed it might be obtained in the very near future. Accordingly, he pressed for all available reinforcements in light troops, mounted troops, lorries, everything in short that would increase mobility, and avail in a war of movement. Heavy artillery would be at a discount in the fighting which was foreseen. The supreme need was mobility.

The last few days of August and the opening week of September 1918—this short period, in its swift world-dramatic change and in the manner in which the leaders of the Allied Armies saw and seized their opportunity, is wonderful and inspiring; full of the romance, and of the tremendous reality, of war. We call for vision in our leadership, 'the vision and the faculty divine.' If the vision and faculty in leadership cannot be discovered in this period, on what page of the history of war can we find them?

The operations during this extraordinary period succeeded and led irresistibly to the decision, through two things. First, the valour of the fighting troops of all ranks. It may be a truism to place that first and foremost in an explanation of the way victory was reached; to leave it out, however, is to get the whole of our reasoning wrong. But the other cause of victory lay in the foresight of British leadership, and the manner in which the Higher Commands fitted together their plans when unity was the supreme essential.

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Before closing this, the last chapter which touches on the very disagreeable topic of civilian intervention, it may be well to examine the question : How came it that our authorities at home had not, by the end of August 1918, jumped to the conclusion that things were now going really well on the Western Front and that they had better leave it to their Commander-in-Chief, absolutely ?

The answer of some severe critics of the civil authority might be that the statesman is always hopelessly wrong when he intervenes in strategy. But that is going to a somewhat extreme length. Granting that the home authorities (1) possessed no real faith in our military leadership, and (2) were mainly in the dark as to strategy, it would still be reasonable to attribute to them an intuition, an instinct, which by the close of August 1918 should tell them the prospects of victory were good and so induce them not to intervene. Such intuition or instinct is often most helpful to statesmen in pressing peace problems in which they do not affect to possess professional knowledge. They have to rely on it, and often it sees them through.

How, then, came it that statesmen or politicians with long experience in public life, and with a genuine will to victory, went so ludicrously astray ? Why did intuition fail them completely ? The dread of casualties has already been considered. Looking into the British casualties in some detail, one finds that after rising to 13,500 in the week ending July 28, 1918, they fell in the following week to 2500—the lowest figure since the week ending March 3, 1918. During the next three weeks of August the figures were 24,000, 21,000, and 26,000 ; whilst in the week ending September 1 they stood at 44,500. The last-mentioned figure is partly to be explained by the fighting about Bullecourt and Riencourt, which was bound to be severe. No doubt this alarmed the civilian authorities, and inclined them towards fresh intervention even in the midst of the victorious British advance.[1] But this of

[1] It actually was one of the excuses offered for the August 31 message.

itself scarcely explains why the natural instinct, frequent among experienced public men in emergencies, should at this time have failed them. What, then, is the explanation? It seems, at any rate to the present writer, who is averse from attributing ill motives or hopeless inability to public men in high civilian office during war, that the full explanation may be sought elsewhere. Their instinct failed them through the vast, unexampled character of the struggle on the Western Front. One cannot say they were dumbfoundered—they certainly never were that—but, in common with large numbers of onlookers, clever and not-clever alike, they were brain-foundered by it. Hence, largely, they went astray at the close of August, and were not even partially restored till the actual breaking of the Hindenburg Line a month or so later.

This does not, however, excuse them from failing to make frank amends by public speech or confession at a later date.

It is possible that some people may be tempted to excuse them for their total failure to understand the British operations of August-September 1918—and therefore to recognise the splendid skill and success of the British Commander-in-Chief—on the assumption that the plan had never been explained to them. The reply to that would be, Surely they should have secured advisers adequate to explain the plan of operations? Moreover, there is very good reason to believe that they were quite well aware of, for instance, the controversy at Sarcus—and that in itself should have enlightened them.

We must, therefore, fall back on the explanation that the huge character of the struggle had quite confounded their judgment.

CHAPTER II

SHAKING OFF THE SHACKLES

(By J. H. B.)

In the course of a series of articles and lectures which became very popular in the early stages of the war, a well-known writer likened the struggle in the west to the contest of two evenly matched wrestlers, and declared that though for a time mighty efforts would be put forth with little apparent advantage to either side, yet ultimately the moment would arrive when one or other of the combatants would reach the limit of his endurance, and that then the end would come quickly and with dramatic suddenness.

The simile was not unjust, and the forecast so near the truth that, had it been remembered when the novelty of war had worn off and the popular taste for military theorising had evaporated, the violent contrast between the military situation at the beginning of July 1918 and that of four months later would have occasioned less general surprise. The change was indeed a startling one, and, to those who had not been able to read aright the meaning of the long and costly struggles of the preceding two and a half years, well-nigh inexplicable. It is scarcely to be wondered at that the generality of the Allied peoples sought for an easy explanation in what seemed to them the only intelligible alteration of circumstance which might be expected to affect the prospects of their armies—the appointment of a generalissimo.

It has already been explained that even upon the defensive battles of the spring the effect of the appointment of a supreme commander had been more apparent than real. Of greater moment than any outward tribute to the principle

of ' unity of command ' had been the selection of a general to control the French Armies whose views upon the military situation agreed with its real needs. Similarly, the sudden collapse of the German powers of resistance in the latter half of 1918 was due to no change of policy or fresh genius of leadership in the direction of the Allied Armies. On the contrary, it was the natural culmination of the efforts of past years, the fruit of the military power and insight that had evolved the wearing-out battle and found courage to persist in it. It will be the purpose of the present chapters to show that the policy of the British offensive of 1918, and in a secondary degree that of the operations of our Allies, was the same policy which had directed the operations of the British Armies throughout the two preceding years.

The importance of the elevation of Foch to the post of supreme commander on the Western Front was indeed immense. It lay, however, less in the personal inspiration of that great general, and still less in any peculiar virtue attaching to the title of the post he held, than in the fact that his appointment guaranteed that, so far as the influence of one man could effect it, the future policy of the French Armies would be the same as that which Joffre had been converted to in 1916 and had been the deliberate, sustained, and unswerving policy of the British Armies ever since Sir Douglas Haig assumed command of them.

There had been many improvements, of course, in the methods and means of giving effect to that policy. Since the early days of 1916 we had made enormous strides in tactics, training, fighting skill and experience and in staff work, as well as in weapons and equipment. Long before the end of the war the British Army had become a fighting machine of the very highest order of efficiency. Yet, like the fighting quality of our troops, the policy of the British Higher Command also preserved its distinctive character. No more in the summer of 1918 than in the spring of 1917 did we believe that the war could be won by a sudden decisive stroke, such as Nivelle had planned, which would

sweep all before it. Rather in 1918 as in 1916 and 1917 we pinned our faith to a continuous succession of attacks each with limited objectives, pressed one after another as rapidly as was consistent with due preparation and economy of troops, and persisted in week after week and month after month, so far as weather and our resources would let us, until either winter put an end to active hostilities or the power of the enemy was broken.

There was no short-cut to victory in the British military guide-book. The war could only be won by fighting and continuing to fight until the moral and physical resources of the Germans were exhausted. For three years our offensive strategy and tactics were devoted to this end, seeking to attack where the enemy would be forced to accept battle and in the manner that offered the best chance of a steady progression at the least cost to ourselves. If this policy could be persisted in and the enemy given no rest, sooner or later the last line of the enemy's field defences and the last fibre of his moral resolution would alike be overborne. Then the moment would be ripe for exploitation and the harvest of our endeavour would be reaped.

None could tell for certain when that moment would be reached. We had been within sight of it at the end of 1916. We had been robbed of it in the spring of 1917 by the decision of our Allies to revert once more to the false policy they had followed in 1914 and 1915. Later we had been disappointed by the break-down of French moral consequent on the failure of Nivelle's offensive, and finally by the collapse of Russia. Then Germany had had her turn and had failed, and her failure gave us our opportunity. We seized it and developed it by the methods of the Somme and Flanders, and this time we were backed by our Allies. The spirit of this British policy was expressed in the 'sincere and ardent desire to fight' which at all times the British Command sought to instil into all ranks. The phrase found its echo and its counterpart in Foch's 'tout le monde à la bataille,' a sentence that was often on his lips. Here Haig and Foch met on common ground. Better than any system of 'unity of

command ' and divided responsibility was the broad identity of policy that now inspired the commanders of the French and British Armies. The bitter experiences of March and April had not been able to quench the resolution or damp the ardour of the British Commander or of his troops. Aided, no doubt, by the prestige of his new position, the indomitable spirit of France's greatest fighting general was able to inspire his own troops to co-operate effectively with the continued effort of their British Allies. Beneath the trip-hammer blows of the British Army, regular and unrelenting as fate, and supported by the French, American and Belgian offensives to the north and south of the British drive, the German Army broke in pieces and the greatest of wearing-out battles was crowned with victory.

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At the beginning of May 1918, however, the British Army had a long road to travel before it could even think of an offensive. Of the sixty British infantry divisions then in France, ten [1] were marked on the daily situations report with a red circle, indicating that they had been reduced to cadre divisions and could not be made up to strength, at least not for some considerable period of time. Further, the 50th [2] Division was on its way to the area of the Sixth French Army about Fère-en-Tardenois, first of the five ill-fated British divisions sent to ' rest ' on the French front. These five divisions would soon be lost to the British Army for a time. The two Portuguese divisions that had so long held a wide sector of the British front had been withdrawn to back areas and stayed there. The British Commander-in-Chief had therefore forty-five infantry divisions for fighting purposes, and of these fourteen had incurred since the outbreak of the March battle average casualties exceeding 5000 per division. Only six divisions had taken no direct part in the

[1] The 14th, 16th, 30th, 31st, 34th, 39th, 40th, 59th, 61st and 66th. The average casualties of these ten divisions since March 21, 1918, were 6331 per division.

[2] When sent to ' rest ' on the French front the 50th Division had already suffered no less than 8641 casualties since March 21, 1918.

March or April battles. The bayonet and sabre strength of the British Army in France on March 20, 1918, was 582,000.[1] On March 31, 1918, it had fallen to 530,000, and though made up by reinforcements from home, Italy and the east to 568,000 on May 1, by the end of that month it had fallen once more to 534,000. The twenty-eight British divisions in line at the beginning of May 1918 were holding average frontages of 4800 yards per division.

On the other hand, there were at this date nine French infantry divisions and three French cavalry divisions in or arriving in the Second British Army area. A tenth French infantry division was moving north behind the First British Army, and two other French divisions were in Third Army back areas. Though local fighting continued for some weeks longer in the Locre, Kemmel and Dickebusch sectors, the northern German attack had spent itself as the southern attack had done. The presence of the French divisions made the Second Army front reasonably secure ; the centre of the British line was intact, and the right was daily establishing itself more firmly in its new line. The enemy's last attempt to advance in this latter sector, made at Villers-Bretonneux on April 24, had been brilliantly defeated.

For the moment, therefore, the British front was once more reasonably safe, and the fact that the enemy had already engaged 141 divisions in his two great attacks made it likely that, despite his natural desire to obtain a decision quickly before the summer brought American troops into the field in force, he would be compelled to wait for a time before attempting another offensive. British eyes turned expectantly to the long southern flank of the German March attack, hoping to see a French counter-offensive developing there while the German defences and communications were still incomplete, but the opportunity was not taken. The enemy kept the initiative in his hands and on May 27 struck

[1] The highest point reached during the war was 768,000 on July 1, 1917. From this figure our bayonet and sabre strength in France had fallen to 612,000 by the end of 1917. On December 31, 1916, it was 678,000.

a new blow, this time against the French front yet once more involving British troops.[1]

The effect of this battle and of the other attacks on the French front which followed it was, as might be expected, the gradual withdrawal of the French divisions then with the British Army. By June 9 the French troops with the British had been reduced to six divisions in the Second Army area, and a month later these also had been withdrawn. Their place was taken by untrained American troops, which even before the May battle had commenced to arrive behind the British front.

The presence of these American divisions, even though they were not yet fit to take their place in the line, went some way to relieve the British of any anxiety they might otherwise have felt regarding their own front. The physique, bearing and conduct of the American troops created a very favourable impression, while all ranks showed great eager-

[1] Jean de Pierrefeu, the writer of the French official *communiqués*, in his book *G.Q.G. Secteur 1*, vol. ii., at pages 160 *et seq.*, devotes some space to an ingenious attempt to explain why this attack took Foch so completely by surprise. The Generalissimo's line of argument, he suggests, was as follows: 'If Ludendorff attacks the British front, where I am awaiting him with all my forces, I shall infallibly break his assault. If he attacks somewhere else, so much the worse; but it is better to be surprised elsewhere than at the spot where defeat would be irreparable.' If this was, in fact, Foch's reasoning, it affords striking justification, it may be remarked in passing, of the British dispositions on March 21! It can hardly be the correct explanation, however, for the writer has to support his argument by antedating the danger to the British front represented in July and late June by Rupprecht of Bavaria's reserves. In May the German northern group of armies were still suffering from the effects of their abortive struggle on the Lys. Moreover, there were only fourteen French divisions behind the whole British front, and the British were so far from fearing an immediate renewal of the offensive on their front that they were particularly anxious and warned their Allies about the Reims front, to which their exhausted divisions of the IXth Corps were being sent. The British Command did not consider this a safe front, and said so.

The real explanation of the surprise is found on page 164 of Jean de Pierrefeu's second volume. The French had not taken the necessary precautions to inform themselves regarding the enemy's probable intentions. Whereas the British had had very precise knowledge of the enemy's intentions long before March 21, the French prior to May 27 had taken no adequate steps, either by raids, counter-espionage or systematic air reconnaissance, to guard against surprise.

ness and aptitude to learn from the experience of British troops and instructors with whom they came in contact. A well-thought-out scheme of training was drawn up by which, after preliminary training behind the line, American units were to be attached to British units in line and, by taking over in successive stages company, battalion, brigade and divisional fronts, acquire in the quickest, least costly and most practical manner the fighting experience they needed to complete their preparation for battle.

In this way, among other troops, the 33rd American Division, certain of whose units took part contrary to orders in the successful operation against Hamel and Vaire Wood on July 4, and the 30th and 27th Divisions which fought later with the Fourth Army in the great advance, got useful experience of trench warfare. The course of events, however, and the natural desire of the American Command that their Army should be fought as a whole, made it impossible to carry out the full scheme. Early in June (that is, after the outbreak of the Reims–Soissons offensive) five of the ten American divisions at one time assigned to the British front were directed south, the five ultimately left with the British Army being the 27th, 30th, 33rd, 78th and 80th Divisions. All of these five divisions were officially considered by the first week in July to be sufficiently advanced in training to garrison second line defence systems. By the middle of August each ranked as first line troops. Troops of the 33rd American Division had actually been engaged on the IIIrd Corps front on August 9. Three of these divisions then left us, the 27th and 30th remaining to hold a sector of the Ypres front before their transfer to the Fourth British Army.

Meanwhile, despite the set-back of May 27, our own effective strength was gradually increasing. The process of shutting the stable door after the steed had been wellnigh lost had been proceeding apace. Although, as is usual in such cases, the remedial measures taken had been able only partially to repair the consequence of past short-sightedness, numbers were slowly mounting up again and

the quality and training of the troops was improving. Drafts and reinforcements had been coming in not only from home but from the Eastern theatres—a tardy recognition of the supreme importance of the Western Front. By the end of June, the 30th, 31st, 34th, and 61st Divisions had been or were in process of being reconstituted as first-class divisions. The 40th and 59th had been filled up with garrison troops and were available for defensive purposes. Besides the 5th Division brought back from Italy during the April battle, the 52nd and 74th Divisions, together with considerable forces composed of separate battalions drawn from the 60th and other divisions in the Near East, had arrived from Palestine or Salonica and were becoming acclimatised. To be sure the 14th, 16th, 39th and 66th Divisions were not yet fit even for defence, and to the number of these ineffectives had been added, as a result of the May fighting on the French front, the 25th and 50th Divisions. Yet, at the same time, the stream of reinforcements from home and abroad enabled the fighting divisions to be filled up, so that in the first week of August our bayonet and sabre strength had risen once more to 564,000.

Fully as important as the increase in numbers was the steady improvement in training and moral effected during the three quiet months of May, June and July. True, ' quiet ' is once more used as a comparative term, for in that period, as has been seen, the five divisions of the IXth Corps underwent their desperate experience on the French front and later the XXIInd Corps with four other British divisions[1] was heavily involved in the Allied counter-attack of July 18 and following days. On the British front also were a number of successful engagements, some of which would have ranked as quite considerable battles at any other time than in the stupendous days of 1918.

Reference has already been made to the capture of Hamel and Vaire Wood by the Australian Corps assisted by some 60 tanks on July 4, an operation resulting in an advance of $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles on a 4 mile front and the taking of 1500 prisoners.

[1] The 15th, 34th, 51st and 62nd Divisions.

There were also the capture of Ville-sur-Ancre with 400 prisoners by the 2nd Australian Division on May 18; on June 2 successful operations by the 29th Division and 1st Australian Division in the Vieux Berquin and Merris sectors in which 200 prisoners were taken; the capture of another 300 prisoners by the 2nd Australian Division south of Morlancourt on June 10; on June 14 an advance by the 3rd Division on a two mile front near Merville in which some 200 prisoners were secured; the larger operation of the 5th and 31st Divisions on a four mile front east of Nieppe Forest, in which our line was advanced to an average depth of nearly a mile and some 450 prisoners were taken; the final capture with 350 prisoners on July 14 by two battalions of the 6th Division and two companies of the 33rd Division of the positions at Ridge Wood which had so often changed hands between the French and Germans; the capture of Meteren with 350 prisoners by the 9th Division on July 19; and on the 29th the taking of Merris with 170 prisoners by the 1st Australian Division, and of 2½ miles of German trenches and 140 prisoners astride the Bray–Corbie road by other Australian troops.

The news of these successes had had a good effect upon all ranks, restoring the sense of superiority over their opponents which the events of March and April had shaken. Nor, if the truth be told, did the tale of French reverses adversely affect the moral of the British Army. Even at this early date reflections had been made upon the behaviour of British troops, both by French civilians and French soldiers who had not actually fought beside them, which the British knew to be undeserved, and resented. Consequently to observe French troops giving ground far more rapidly than we had done, before much less powerful German attacks than had fallen upon us on March 21, had a distinctly soothing influence—highly improper, doubtless, but very natural—upon British feelings.[1] Anxiety regard-

[1] Compare the remarks of Jean de Pierrefeu, *G.Q.G. Secteur 1*, vol. ii. p. 136, 'Désormais [*i.e.* after the intervention of French troops] toute la France allait prendre à la bataille [of March 21] un poignant intérêt car,

ing the issue on the French front was balanced by a growing belief that the British Army had come successfully through its time of trial and ere long would be again advancing.

These several minor operations, indeed, had brought into high relief a remarkable deterioration in the moral of all but the best of the enemy's troops. It was the first indication of the change that was coming in the character of the fighting in the west, and did not pass unnoticed. The most striking example of this new state of affairs was provided by the incident referred to in the despatch, namely, the bringing in on July 11 and 12 of 223 German prisoners by *patrols* of the 1st Australian Division and the 31st Division. The method was simple. Small parties of British troops—the Australian patrol that began the work consisted only of four men—crawled out through the standing corn and long grass and surprised and held up the nearest German post. They then forced one of their prisoners to guide them to the next German post and held that up in a like manner. Then the process was repeated. No doubt the 'grippe' had something to do with this lowering of the German moral. Prevalent in all armies, and indeed among the civilian population of all countries, it appears to have been peculiarly virulent in the German Army, where a long course of insufficient or 'substitute' food had sapped the constitution of the rank and file. Deaths from the disease would seem to have been comparatively frequent, and in the generality of cases its attacks lasted longer and were more serious among the Germans than with us. Units of the German Army were at times most seriously reduced in strength by the number of victims the 'grippe' claimed among them.

If our own Army suffered less from the effects of the 'grippe,' its recovery from the March and April battles was retarded by a circumstance entirely overlooked by those amateur strategists who thought that in the intervals of fighting on the Western Front the British Army might be

bien que nos alliés combattissent sur notre sol, contre notre envahisseur, un bizarre sentiment nous faisait jusqu'ici accepter leur recul d'un cœur moins angoissé.' And see also p. 185 of the same volume.

shifted backwards and forwards at will between the western and eastern theatres. This was that troops which had been in the east were found to need on being brought to France a lengthy period of acclimatisation before they became fit to fight on the Western Front. They had also to learn the ways of a more intensive form of warfare carried on against a highly trained and scientific enemy; but, quite apart from this necessary training, they had to go through in the first place a regular course of rest and treatment, to get the seeds and weaknesses of malaria out of their systems. It was found by experience that troops that had not been acclimatised in this way could not withstand the physical strain of fighting in France. The arrival of a battalion or a division from the east did not imply, therefore, that the effective British strength in France was at once increased by that amount. It required many long weeks before such troops could safely be used in line.

It will readily be apparent, therefore, that the belief of the German Command that the British could be counted out, and might safely be ignored while the French were being dealt with, was a godsend to the British Army and a fatal mistake on the part of the German leaders. When the Lys offensive had burnt itself out, leaving some fourteen French divisions collected in the British area, the decision to divert the German attack to the thinly held French line between Soissons and Reims was undoubtedly sound. A severe blow could be struck at the French, and the French divisions supporting the British could be forced to come south again. Unless the French, however, could be knocked out altogether in the course of a few weeks, it was surely policy, once the British were left to their own resources, to finish with them before they could recover from the losses and disorganisation of the spring battles.

Our Army was alive to its danger, emphasised as it was by the preparation which in June and July we knew the enemy to be making for a new offensive in Flanders. We did what we could by continuous and methodical use of the advantages of position our artillery enjoyed in the Lys

sector to compel the postponement of the expected blow. The course of events on the French front, however, did more than second our efforts. Led on by the unexpected ease of their victories on the Aisne and Noyon fronts, the Germans resolved to proceed with their attacks upon our Allies, and delayed until too late the renewal of their offensive in the north. Had Prince Rupprecht been able to launch the attack fixed for the last days of July he would have found the British Army well prepared to meet it. Three months' rest had put an entirely new complexion on affairs in the north. The British Army was once more straining at the leash. So confident, as we have seen, did Sir Douglas Haig and his lieutenants feel regarding the situation on the British front that when the French asked for four British divisions to aid their projected counter-stroke, and then for another four divisions to take the place of the French reserve group behind Amiens, so as to set the French divisions free for the same purpose, the eight British divisions were despatched with no more delay than was required to complete the necessary rearrangements of British troops.

It would indeed have been a curious development in the history of 'unity of command' if the first critical request made by the Generalissimo for British aid had been vetoed by the intervention of the British War Cabinet! The British Commander-in-Chief, however, was never driven from what he believed to be the correct military course by fear of responsibility, whether the credit for the decision was to be his own or another's. The risk was that the imminent German attack in the north would be launched before the French stroke had affected the general situation. It was a serious risk,[1] sound as the British Army now was, for what would have been said of the British Command if Prince Rupprecht had attacked successfully and it had then become known that eight divisions had been detached from the British Army on the eve of the expected offensive? Yet

[1] Prince Rupprecht had over 30 divisions in reserve at this date capable of offensive action. Even after the delivery of the French counterstroke on July 18 only two of these were at first sent south.

Haig had balanced the risks, and had no doubt about the right decision.

* * * * * * *

On July 18 the long-expected French counter-stroke was launched successfully, French, American and British troops co-operating in the battle. It was a well-deserved triumph for the Commander-in-Chief of the Allied Armies; for he too had known how to resist the urgent requests of his army commanders for additional troops to meet the German attacks of July 15, and to keep intact until the selected moment the forces he had collected for an effective counter. The lower of the two great bulges in the Allied line, the one at Château Thierry and the other at Amiens, which in early June had gaped like the open jaws of some fierce beast straining to engulf Paris, was shorn off. It was now the turn of the British Army.

Already on July 13 General Rawlinson had been directed by the British Chief of Staff to prepare plans at once for an attack east of Amiens, and on July 17 the Fourth Army Commander had submitted a detailed scheme for this operation. The conditions, as was pointed out, were extremely favourable, for not only were the enemy's defences on this front weak and indifferently organised,[1] but the moral of the German divisions holding this front was distinctly poor, while there were few reserves behind them. Further, the open nature of the country and the long spell of dry weather would greatly assist an operation by tanks. We also enjoyed good observation over the enemy's positions, and had sufficient cover on our own side of the line to enable us to bring up tanks and troops unobserved. Moreover, the operation of July 4 in which the tanks had been very effective had been good training for a larger undertaking of a similar surprise nature.

General Rawlinson's proposal coincided very closely with

[1] The failure of the enemy to put his defences on this front in proper condition and his retention of the Avre and Ancre bridgeheads had been one of the reasons which led the British Command to think that after his flank attacks the enemy intended to resume his attempt in the centre against Amiens, but see Ludendorff's *Memories*, vol. ii. p. 601.

that actually carried out on August 8, the most material difference being that he had urged strongly that the operation should be a purely British one. His reasons were partly technical difficulties in the way of arranging barrages and time-tables when troops of different nationalities were employed, and partly the greater risk, which must exist when the staffs of two armies have to be consulted, that the secret of the operation would become known.[1] He pointed out, too, with great truth, that the most useful assistance the French could give would be to arrange for a converging attack from the direction of Montdidier independent of but simultaneous with our attack east of Amiens. Such an operation might cut off a considerable body of German troops and so have important results.

The main principle of General Rawlinson's plan was approved on July 23, but it was agreed at the instance of General Foch that the First French Army under General Debeney should take part in the British offensive on the right flank of the attack. At the same time General Foch explained his plans for the immediate future. Local offensives were to be carried out by the Allies: (*a*) by the French in the Marne–Aisne sector, with a view to freeing the Paris–Avricourt railway; (*b*) by the British east of Amiens, with a view to freeing the Paris–Amiens railway; and (*c*) by the Americans on the St. Mihiel front, with a view to freeing the Paris–Avricourt railway in that sector. In this way the strategic shackles that restricted the quick movement of troops and supplies along important lateral lines of railway would be shaken off and the Allied Armies would be given space and freedom for future operations. What these further operations might be would depend upon the degree of success attending the three local offensives mentioned and the time left for their development before winter. For the moment the important thing was to regain or retain the initiative, and at the same time recover greater freedom of movement behind our lines.

[1] Cf. Jean de Pierrefeu, *G.Q.G. Secteur 1*, vol. ii. p. 99, on the relative power of the French and British Armies to keep military secrets.

General Rawlinson had estimated that the necessary preparations for the battle would take from two to three weeks from the date of approval of his plan, and August 10 was accordingly decided upon for the operation. On the 28th, however, came news that Foch wanted the attack to be launched on the 8th, and despite obvious difficulties entailed in making such an alteration at such short notice the request was complied with. When on August 1 the Australians took over the French line as far as the Amiens–Roye road inclusive, the first troop movements had begun. It had been decided to reinforce the Fourth Army with the four divisions of the Canadian Corps, the 1st Australian Division and the Cavalry Corps (three divisions), in addition to tanks and artillery. Later, as the scope of the undertaking grew in consequence of Foch's decision to co-operate south-east of Montdidier with French troops if the British attack went well, three other British divisions were assembled in general reserve close behind the battle front and yet other divisions were warned to be in readiness to move south. Everything possible was done to keep the purpose of these movements secret, and troops were not told what their ultimate destination was to be. In the Fourth Army area all movements eastwards were carried out by night and aeroplanes patrolled the army area by day to report to Headquarters any signs of abnormal activity. It was hoped that the extension of the British front would furnish a natural explanation of the movement of British troops southwards, and that it would be taken to mean that the British intention was to set free French divisions for the Champagne battle and remain on the defensive ourselves on own southern front.

This expectation was realised. In the early hours of August 4 the enemy raided three posts on our new front at Hourges and secured a prisoner; but the account the captured Australian gave of our proceedings and intentions confirmed the enemy in his opinion that the extension of our front had no other object than to set free French troops. The whole arrangements for the battle, indeed, were a triumph of speed, secrecy, thoroughness and forethought,

and the efforts of the commands and staffs were seconded with the utmost loyalty by the troops. There was a story current at the time which, whether true or untrue, is a good illustration of the spirit of the rank and file throughout this period. One night just before the battle, two runners, making their way down from the line, suddenly as they turned the shoulder of a ridge of rising ground came upon a long line of tanks looming mistily out of the darkness as far as the eye could pierce. 'Gawd!' exclaimed the one; 'just look at that.' 'Sh!' replied the other, laying a finger to his lips; 'I guess there 's a raid on!'

Debeney's First French Army, reinforced by four French divisions, had, on July 28, been placed under Sir Douglas Haig's command for the operation. The task assigned to our Allies had been much simplified by the withdrawal of the enemy on August 3 from the positions held by him west of the Avre river; but even so the difficulties General Rawlinson had foreseen in a mixed operation made themselves felt. The essence of the British plan was surprise, and to make this more effectual there was to be no preliminary bombardment on the British front of attack. The French, however, desired to bombard the German positions opposed to them prior to launching their infantry assault. The difficulty was got over by arranging for the French bombardment to open at the same time as the British attack, *i.e.* 4.20 A.M., and that the first assault by French infantry should commence on the immediate right of the British front three-quarters of an hour later. As the battle progressed it was to be gradually extended southwards by other French infantry assaults developed at successively later hours; until three hours after the launching of the British attack the village of Braches, seven miles [1] beyond the British right, had been included in the active front.

The effect of this arrangement was that the French rate of progress consistently lagged behind the British, and the

[1] This is the distance to Braches inclusive round the bend of the Moreuil sub-salient. The greatest width of the French area of advance on this day was some 4½ miles.

unfortunate precedent established on the first day of the battle was persisted in, whatever the reason may have been, right through the advance, as the map clearly shows. The immediate effect was to sacrifice any chance of enveloping *en bloc* German troops in the minor salient at Moreuil. The postponement of the French attack south-east of Montdidier till 4 P.M. on August 9 and the failure of our Allies to press it vigorously behind that town lost the opportunity of cutting off any considerable body of German troops or material in the major salient at Montdidier.

Our own task on August 8 was, firstly, to disengage Amiens and the Paris–Amiens railway by securing the line of the old Amiens outer defences between Hangest and Harbonnières; secondly, to push forward as rapidly as possible towards the line Roye–Chaulnes, thrusting the enemy back in the general direction of Ham and so facilitating the operations of our Allies on the Noyon–Montdidier front. The advance of the Canadian, Australian and Cavalry Corps to these objectives was to be covered on their left flank north of the Somme by the IIIrd Corps. This latter Corps had the misfortune to be attacked on the morning of August 6 during the process of a relief, and to lose an important piece of high ground on the ridge between Sailly-Laurette and Morlancourt. This ground was required by us to afford cover for our assembly and gun positions for the battle, and had been taken for that express purpose on July 29. At all costs the essential cover lost in the enemy's retaliatory attack had to be regained, and this was accomplished during the early morning of August 7. Troops intended for the main battle had to be employed, however, for the purpose and very little time was left for reorganisation. Moreover, the enemy was naturally on the alert and his guns were trained on the sector. The result was that on August 8 our full objectives north of the Somme were not reached, but sufficient progress was made to achieve the principal purpose of the attack in this sector, namely, to secure the flank of the main attack south of the river.

South of the Somme, the surprise was complete. The

progress of our troops was so rapid that certain of the enemy's batteries never came into action at all and were captured with breech- and muzzle-covers on the guns. The line of the old outer defences of Amiens was gained by our infantry at all points except at Le Quesnel, where our right joined the French area of the battle. Our cavalry reached and held positions well to the east of the infantry and some seven miles within the German lines. Le Quesnel was taken during the night.

As our troops advanced eastwards and south-eastwards, the task of the XXXIst French Corps on our right was to eat up the salient lying between the Avre river and the Amiens–Roye road by a succession of attacks delivered north-eastwards from the line of the Avre, the ultimate objective of our Allies being the old Amiens defence line at and about Hangest. This objective they did not reach, their final line for the day lying a mile to the west of it, from Fresnoy to the Avre river at La Neuville. To this extent General Rawlinson's objection to a mixed operation was justified, but the hanging back on the right was not enough to mar the truly remarkable success of the Allied attack. Not only had the German line been breached completely, but the German salient at Montdidier was directly threatened from the north.

On the 9th the threat to Montdidier was rapidly accentuated by the continued progress of the Allied Armies on the Amiens battle front. The British centre was pushed forward another four miles to Lihons. On the left the IIIrd Corps gained the Chipilly spur, so that matters in that sector were once more satisfactory. The British right was advanced four and a half miles along the Roye road to Bouchoir, and though from that point the line of the First French Army ran back somewhat suddenly to Contoire, the British at Bouchoir were five miles in rear of the German garrisons at Montdidier. When, therefore, the right of the First French Army attacked during the afternoon in the Assainvillers sector and commenced to threaten Montdidier from the south the enemy withdrew hastily from the whole of the

narrowing Montdidier salient. The disadvantage of a method of attack by which the French followed up but were always some hours behind the British effort at once made itself felt, for by the time the southern jaw of the pincers closed the enemy had evacuated the threatened area. The whole of the German forces in the salient south of the British thrust were in retreat, and when on the morning of August 10 the adjoining Third French Army also attacked they could secure no more than 1000 prisoners and 24 guns, though on a front of 12 miles from the right of the First French Army at Courcelles to Chevincourt they were able to advance to a maximum depth of six miles.

By the evening of the 10th the German line was beginning to straighten and on August 12 ran more or less directly north from the Thiescourt *massif* to Roye, Chaulnes and Bray-sur-Somme. Resistance was stiffening, and before the British lay the riven area of the old Somme battlefield, a wilderness of shell holes, derelict trenches and rusted wire entanglements, the whole masked by a tangled growth of coarse vegetation. Ground of such a nature offered ideal conditions for machine-gun defence. It was impossible country for cavalry and very difficult for tanks. In face of serious opposition, only infantry well supported by artillery could hope to carry it, and then only at severe cost. Moreover it would take time to get adequate artillery into position. It was evident that the moment had come when decisions of high importance would have to be taken.

Meanwhile the French counter-offensive in Champagne had been held up since August 4 on the line of the Vesle river. After the success of the first surprise assault on July 18 progress had been increasingly slow; until the enemy, having gained time to complete the evacuation of troops and material from the narrowing salient, on August 2 and 3 retreated in two bounds to the strong defensive position afforded by the valley of the Vesle between Soissons and Reims. Here he was still ten miles or more in advance of the line from which he had attacked in May, and while the important lateral railway between Château Thierry and

Chalons was cleared, that between Soissons and Reims remained interrupted. The British attack of August 8 had accomplished its immediate purpose at a blow, and the railway at Amiens was completely freed. Yet, although as the result of this operation the enemy had been compelled to withdraw his whole front between Albert and the Oise at Ribécourt, a distance of some fifty miles along the line of the original salient, the British advance had not yet progressed far enough to influence directly the French front south of the Oise, where the Tenth French Army under Mangin was preparing to attack the plateau north-west of Soissons.

The position was that on the whole front between Reims and Albert the enemy was now holding a line convenient for defence, and the problem of deciding in what sector to press the attack was one of no small difficulty. In these circumstances, Foch desired the British attack to be pushed forward frontally without hesitation or delay, till the Somme had been reached and passed. If the advance could be carried forward to Ham and the crossings of the river gained, the German front between Noyon and Soissons would be directly menaced and sooner or later would have to be withdrawn also.

Mangin says that Foch expected the British and French attack to make greater progress.[1] It is difficult to see what reasons he could have had for this expectation. The line already gained had completely reduced the great German salient opposite Amiens, and on the British front had brought our troops up to an obstacle even more formidable than the Vesle. The effect of surprise was gone, and on August 10 the British Commander-in-Chief, as already shown, had satisfied himself by personal investigation that there was a real stiffening of the German resistance. Stubborn fighting and hard won advances during the next few days put it beyond question that the Germans intended and were able to offer a very strenuous resistance to further attacks on this front.

[1] Mangin, *Comment finit la Guerre*, p. 203.

The British Commander decided that the proper course to pursue was to shift the front of attack to a new sector, where the advantages of ground and surprise would once more be in his favour and success would give him automatically results which south of the Somme could only be gained by protracted frontal attacks and heavy cost in lives. A glance at the accompanying sketch will show more plainly than words can do the nature of and reasons for Sir Douglas Haig's decision. The shaded area represents the ground actually won by the Allies in the battles of 1916. The area of devastation by shell fire and the old lines of trench and wire naturally extended for some distance on either side of the area then conquered. It will be seen that the attack launched on August 21 struck down behind the old battlefield from the north, and combined with our advance south of the Somme to make the minor German salient at Albert impossible to defend. It will be apparent also that as we manœuvred the enemy out of the old Somme battlefield north of the Somme we should turn the line held by his troops south of the river and enable our troops in the original battle sector to resume their advance. The objects that Marshal Foch desired to gain by frontal attacks would therefore be achieved as part of a larger operation and at far less cost.

The situation irresistibly reminds one of the similar incident of July 1916, when Joffre urged Haig to repeat the frontal attack on Thiepval, and Haig decided rather to put to full account the advantages he had gained and turn the Thiepval position from the south. So confident was the British Commander of the correctness of his view on the occasion now in question that he persisted in his opinion despite the fact that he was unable to persuade Marshal Foch to accept it. Ultimately, as we have shown, when at a meeting at Sarcus the Generalissimo endeavoured to insist that the British should resume forthwith their attack south of the Somme, Sir Douglas Haig definitely refused to do so.

The event amply justified Sir Douglas Haig's views and

action. Activity on the original battle front was carefully maintained, and the new battle which broke out on the Bucquoy plateau on August 21, though the enemy had warning of it before the actual assault, was not known to him early enough or in sufficient detail to enable him to prepare a successful resistance. The advantages of position were once more in our favour, and the going was excellent for tanks. Though on the first day our troops were held up somewhat short of their full objectives, the results of this attack, and of another preparatory operation in which Albert was taken by the IIIrd Corps on the 22nd, were deemed sufficiently encouraging to justify the order for a general advance on the 23rd on a thirty-three mile front from our junction with the French to Mercatel, south of Arras. This wide front of attack would later be extended a further seven miles northwards.

This battle was the test of something more than the correctness of Sir Douglas Haig's views as to the proper front of attack. It was to put to the proof also his opinion that the Allied successes so far gained were due not merely to the excellence of the local arrangements for surprise assaults, but to a definite and progressive deterioration in the moral and fighting stamina of the German Army as a whole, and that by engaging once more in a wearing-out battle the breaking-point could be reached and Germany finally beaten.

It is believed that, with the one possible exception of the Hindenburg Line attack, the last ten days of August constitute the most critical period of the Allied advance. We had gained great successes locally on a number of previous occasions during the war, some of them as complete if not so extensive as that of August 8; but hitherto the breaking-point of German resistance had not been reached generally throughout the German Army, and the successes had remained local. The British had neither the time nor resources to mount so soon after the great attack of August 8 other attacks of equal weight and finish. Much of the subsequent fighting on the enlarged battle front would clearly have to be and in fact was done by troops already

in line and partially tired by trench warfare. From attacks made in such circumstances it would have been vain to have expected any considerable success in 1916 or 1917. But the British Commander-in-Chief believed that conditions had changed, and that the reward of two years' incessant battle fighting was at last within the reach of the British Army.

The result of the fighting of August 21 to September 3 —for the attacks of the First Army east of Arras, in conjunction with the left of the Third Army, on August 26 and September 2 were a logical extension of the battle commenced by the centre of the Third Army on August 21—proved that the British Commander-in-Chief was right in this opinion also. The fortnight embraces some of the hardest and certainly the most anxious fighting of the whole campaign, and 53,000 prisoners and 470 guns taken by us represent the largest captures of any phase of the advance. Though at times the enemy surrendered freely, at others his resistance was desperate, and there were many occasions when our progress was slow and won only by a persistent and dogged determination to get forward. By a series of successful operations, many of them of the highest individual brilliance, the battle launched from the north-west, and with its centre of gravity throughout maintained there though the attack was taken up subsequently all along the active front, drove the enemy out of the old Somme battle area both north and south of the river. Giving him no rest or time to reorganise, assault was multiplied on assault until the line of the Somme itself and the winter line of 1916 to the north of Péronne were successfully turned, the one by the capture of Mont St. Quentin by the Australians and the other by the successful intervention of the First Army.

These great events on the British battle front had their natural effects elsewhere. To the north the German evacuation of the Lys salient, the first indications of which had become apparent even before the attack of August 8, was hurried forward and, hastened by several successful minor operations carried out by the British troops in line, was completed during the first week in September. To the

south the Generalissimo's promise to support the British effort had been redeemed by the operations commenced by Mangin's Army on August 17. Attacking on that day in the Autreches sector, our Allies advanced to a depth of about a mile on a three-mile front. This comparatively small beginning, however, was followed up and developed in a manner not dissimilar, though on a less extensive scale, to that followed by the British in development of the attack of their Third Army four days later. Both the British and French had speedily found and applied the answer to the tactics of evacuation by which General Gouraud had parried the German attack east of Reims on July 15. By the 19th Mangin's battle extended from Fontenoy to Carlepont, a distance of 11 miles, and had progressed to a depth of as much as 2 miles. Some 1700 prisoners had been taken in these preliminary advances by which the German covering positions were overrun. On the same day the Third French Army joined in on the left of the Tenth between Ribécourt and Beuvraignes (south of Roye) and advanced a mile or more on this front of 14 miles.

Having captured the German forward zone in this manner and having meantime hurried forward his artillery to the farthest limit possible, at 7.10 A.M. on August 20, after four days' continuous bombardment of the German positions of resistance, General Mangin launched his main attack against them on a front of some 16 miles between Soissons and the Oise. The assault was successful. Between Bieuxy and Carlepont the French line was carried forward a distance of from 2 to 3 miles and the tale of prisoners rose to 8000. The German positions in the angle of low-lying, marshy ground at the junction of the Ailette and Oise rivers between Couchy Forest and Noyon had become impossible. During the next two days the Tenth and Third French Armies pushed on rapidly, until by the evening of the 22nd the whole of this area had been cleared south of the Ailette river.

This success was admirably calculated to combine with the British advances on the Somme, besides threatening the

German forces holding the line of the Vesle east of Soissons. While in this latter sector the high ground north of Soissons at Juvigny and Terny and farther east at Laffaux and Vauxaillon, before which ran the most southern sector of the Hindenburg Line, offered formidable obstacles to progress in this direction, in the sectors north of the Oise the German positions on the Noyon–Roye–Chaulnes line, already endangered from the south, were shortly to be rendered indefensible by the northern turning movement of the British Armies.

Briefly, the sequence of events was as follows. Between August 21 and 26 the central and northern divisions of the Third British Army had been bearing down south-eastwards upon Bapaume. In the five days they had progressed about five miles, slowly driving before them a stubborn and reluctant enemy. On the 26th the right of the First Army east of Arras tore a fresh gap in the German defences. Bapaume was now well overhung by the British advance to the north. Though for two days and more the enemy clung desperately to his position here, in order to prevent the utter annihilation of his divisions in the salient south of the town, our forces operating in this latter area had already begun to press forward more rapidly, the left of the Fourth Army on the north bank of the river keeping pace with the right of the Third Army.

Recognising the impossibility of holding the Bapaume line for more than a very short period and that the British forces north of the Somme would then quickly overlap the line held by him south of the river, the enemy reconciled himself to the loss of his positions west of the Somme river above Péronne. On the evening of this day, August 26, the enemy evacuated Roye. The object which Sir Douglas Haig had sought when he transferred the main direction of attack from the difficult sector south of the Somme to the more favourable area on the Third Army front north of the river was achieved. On the 27th the British forces south of the Somme commenced a general advance, which they were able to pursue without serious difficulty or more

than local fighting till the river line south of Péronne was reached at noon on August 29.

Meanwhile our Allies, profiting by the same circumstance, also began to advance. Passing Roye on August 27, on the 28th the First French Army occupied Nesle. Next day the Third French Army re-entered Noyon. The line of the Somme had been reached on the whole Allied front in less than a fortnight from the time when Foch had desired us to press on to it by frontal attacks. On the 28th also Mangin had commenced a series of attacks eastwards in the sector lying between the Aisne and the Ailette north of Soissons. Making little progress at first, he continued his pressure. On the 29th the 32nd American Division, fighting under his orders, reached Juvigny, and following this success on the 30th and 31st the enemy began to give ground in the whole sector. On these days our Allies progressed to a depth of from one to two miles on a front of about eleven miles. Two days later, corresponding with the operation of the First British Army on that date, Mangin again attacked in the same sector with fourteen divisions and after heavy fighting again carried his line forward on both flanks of his battle front.

Before this date, however, namely during the night of August 30-31, the line of the Somme itself had been turned by the capture of Mont St. Quentin in most brilliant fashion by the 2nd Australian Division. Péronne fell on September 1, and north of that town the enemy, who had evacuated Bapaume early in the morning of August 29, was forced back to a line the southern portion of which corresponded roughly with that held by him during the winter of 1916, while its northern sector linked up with the powerful branch system known as the Drocourt–Quéant line. Already endangered by the breach effected in its centre at Péronne, this strong position, on which the enemy might well have hoped to have stood sufficiently long to enable him to reorganise his forces, was rendered untenable on September 2 by the storming of the Drocourt–Quéant line by the Canadian Corps and the 4th British Division. In the

Péronne sector and to the north of it the Germans were counter-attacking with determination, and at times with local success, when the new blow fell. Its effect was immediate. The enemy at once abandoned all hope of making good his resistance on the defensive line of which the river Somme south of Péronne formed the central sector. On the whole front from the Oise river to the Sensée his troops fell back, in the area of the British attack in haste and obvious disorder, to the positions immediately covering the Hindenburg Line and the Canal du Nord north of Havrincourt.

Nor did the area of withdrawal stop at the Oise river. Influenced also no doubt in the Aisne sector by the constant pressure of Mangin's Army, the enemy had clearly decided to withdraw to the same positions that he had selected for his permanent line on the occasion of the Great Retreat of the spring of 1917. On September 3 the group of French Armies on our right reported distinct signs of a German withdrawal from the line of the Vesle river, where the enemy had stood for a month and had not lately been attacked. On September 4 the whole Aisne valley was reported to be obscured by smoke, and during this day French troops crossed the Vesle river. During the previous night also French patrols had crossed the Somme Canal at Fontaine-les-Pargny and reported that the Germans were falling back. That afternoon came the report that the enemy was retiring rapidly on the front of the Third French Army. On September 5 the Australians crossed the Somme after some sharp fighting with German rear-guards. Thenceforward the whole Allied line moved steadily on until by September 8, a short week after the Drocourt–Quéant attack, from beyond Fismes to Havrincourt the enemy was back in the positions, or in positions immediately in front of them, to which he had retreated in the spring of 1917. Numerous counter-attacks all along the Allied line showed that here he was prepared to stand.

The first phase of the great British drive was wellnigh ended. The losses of the spring had been redeemed and

more than redeemed, for the whole of the northern sector of the Hindenburg Line and its support system was in our hands. By a happy combination of hard and skilful fighting on the part of the troops and wise, far-sighted direction of the battle on the part of the British Command, much more than Marshal Foch in July had planned to achieve had been gained rapidly and at not excessive cost. Further important decisions as to the future conduct of the campaign were under consideration between the Allied chiefs ; but, meanwhile, the third of Marshal Foch's battles of disengagement, that which was to free the Paris–Avrincourt railway at St. Mihiel, was yet to be fought.

The German salient at St. Mihiel formed a roughly equilateral triangle with sides about twenty miles in length, the advanced point being on the Meuse, and the base formed by a German chord position between the Bois-le-Prêtre on the Moselle and Fresnes-en-Wœuvre. Though sharing the dangers common to all salients, the position was of much natural strength and at once a threat and an inconvenience to the French front. It had the additional advantage from the German point of view that it covered the approaches to Metz and the Briey coal-fields.

The American attack was already mounted, and, as we learn from Ludendorff,[1] the Germans were already considering the advisability of economising troops by evacuating the threatened area. Indeed the first steps had been taken, but the decision had been postponed too long.

The scheme of operations was that after four hours' intense bombardment the First American Army should attack at 7 A.M. the east face of the salient with six divisions[2] on a front of some fifteen miles between the Moselle and Xivray. These troops were to drive north-westwards across the heart of the salient to meet a less powerful attack delivered at the same hour on a front of about three and a half miles by another American division and a French Colonial

[1] Ludendorff's *My War Memories*, vol. ii. p. 708.

[2] An American division had between two and three times the infantry strength of a French or British at this date.

division against the northern sector of the west face of the salient, opposite St. Remy.[1] At the same time three other French divisions were to attack the point of the salient at St. Mihiel town, so as to hold the German troops there till their retreat was cut off by the converging attacks from the flanks of the salient. The two flank attacks were executed with uncommon dash and energy, the main assault from the east carrying the German positions to a maximum depth of about six miles on a front of about eleven miles during the first day's fighting. The western attack was equally successful, reaching and taking Dommartin, two and a half miles within the German lines, and enlarging the breach on this flank to a width of some six miles. The French attack in the centre made progress in the suburbs of St. Mihiel on the west bank of the Meuse and on the east bank south of the town to a depth of about a mile.

Next day the American troops joined hands across the salient and at the same time enlarged the front of their advance both eastwards and westwards. By the evening of the 14th they had established a line across the base of the salient from the Moselle at Norroy to beyond Fresnes, whence, following the American success, French troops were able to occupy the German covering positions to a depth of from one to two miles for a distance of eleven miles westwards as far as Douaumont in the Verdun battle area. Some 16,000 prisoners and 450 guns were taken by the Americans in these operations.

With the reduction of the St. Mihiel salient and the disengagement of the Paris–Avricourt railway at this point the tasks that the Generalissimo had set to the Allied Armies in July were fully accomplished. France once more had breathing space and the limbs of the Allied Armies were freed. In the process of achieving the tasks first set new possibilities had opened out. Fresh plans had already been decided on, and were on the point of being put into execution.

[1] Mangin, p. 206, says that Pershing attacked with fourteen American divisions. This is incorrect. Only nine American divisions took part in the battle. Cf. Report of General John J. Pershing, U.S.A., to the Secretary of War, dated November 20, 1918.

CHAPTER III

GERMANY DEFEATED

(By J. H. B.)

'It would depend upon the nature of the success which might be obtained in these different Allied operations' [*i.e.* those intended to free the three important railways], 'whether they could be more fully exploited before the winter set in. It was subsequently arranged that attacks would be pressed in *a converging direction* towards Mézières by the French and American Armies, while at the same time the British Armies, attacking towards the line St. Quentin–Cambrai, would strike directly at the vital lateral communications, running through Maubeuge to Hirson and Mézières, by which alone the German forces on the Champagne front could be supplied and maintained.'

* * * * * * *

'The details of the strategic plan outlined' [above] 'upon which future operations should be based were the subject of careful discussion between Marshal Foch and myself. . . . Ultimately, it was decided that as soon as possible after' [the St. Mihiel] 'attack four *convergent* and simultaneous offensives should be launched by the Allies as follows :—

'By the Americans west of the Meuse in the direction of Mézières ;

'By the French west of Argonne in close co-operation with the American attack and with the same general objectives ;

'By the British on the St. Quentin–Cambrai front in the general direction of Maubeuge ;

'By Belgian and Allied forces in Flanders in the direction of Ghent.'

Thus paragraphs 13 and 31 of the British Commander-in-Chief's Victory Despatch, though without the italics, giving the four Allied offensives, not in order of importance, but from the right to the left of the line in accordance with British military practice. Mangin,[1] seeking to explain the manœuvre and having no reason to enquire whence the inspiration came, writes that Marshal Foch decided to direct that these attacks *should be convergent* because the result must be to throw back the enemy upon the Ardenne Forest country which lack of communications rendered untenable by modern armies. It will be seen later that Mangin's explanation is incomplete in an important particular, but in another matter of even greater moment the despatch itself, as well as Mangin, gives an incorrect impression.

As on certain other occasions involving matters concerning our Allies, the despatch does not set out the whole story. The words 'careful discussion' cover a great deal. Foch and Haig had indeed been in consultation regarding the future policy of the Allied Armies ever since the progress of the August battle north of the Somme had given proof of the change that had overtaken our opponents. It was clear by the end of that month that the Allied operations could and should be given a far more extended scope than was contained in the original plan. Accordingly Foch put forward a new and enlarged scheme. This scheme was not convergent, and in this vital particular it was not the scheme that was carried out.

It has been seen that the success of the St. Mihiel attack had removed the first great obstacle in the way of an advance towards the Briey coal-fields and the Metz gate to Germany. The bait proved too attractive for the French Generalissimo. Foch's extended plan as originally put forward by him included the British advance on Maubeuge and the French and Belgian operations in Champagne and Flanders; but the American Army, and it may safely be assumed French divisions in its support, were to be directed eastwards towards Metz and the Saar basin. In other words, the direc-

[1] *Comment finit la Guerre*, p. 209.

tion of the American offensive was to be divergent from the line of advance of the remainder of the Allied Armies.

Had this faulty strategy been given effect to, there is little doubt, having regard to the actual results obtained by the combined Franco-American attack on September 26 and following days, that the operations of the French Armies in Champagne would have been seriously weakened and the support given by those operations to the all-important British drive lessened to a critical degree. The British Commander-in-Chief, however, was quick to see the error of the plan submitted to him, and to press for its alteration. In his view it was essential that the whole of the Allied attacks should be convergent and directed to a common aim, in the realisation of which each army should give the other all the assistance in its power in close co-operation. The Generalissimo accepted the modifications proposed to him and issued to the Allied Commanders directions for the coming general offensive in which the actions of each army were properly co-ordinated.

The accompanying sketch, which shows with sufficient accuracy the German front line of August 7, 1918, together with the more or less completely organised lines of defence established or projected behind it, will serve to illustrate the broad outline of the Allied plan. The position of the opposed armies on September 25, 1918, is indicated by the second of the two thick black lines. The key to the situation was the Liège bottle-neck, through which had to pass the vast bulk of the supplies required by the northern and central groups of the German Armies. Through this neck, too, in the event of defeat, lay the only road by which the German Army could hope to reach the Rhine as a fighting force. The principal lateral railway which fed the German front at this date was the line which runs from Montmédy to Mézières, Hirson, Maubeuge and Mons, and the main trunk line to and from Germany that which runs through Charleroi, Namur and Liège to the great munition factories of Westphalia. The capacity of the line along the twisting valley of the Meuse between Mézières and Namur

was limited, and northwards across the Ardennes there was neither road nor railway which could serve the needs of a modern army. The road and railway centres about Maubeuge and Mons were therefore vital both to the maintenance and to the retreat of the German Armies south and south-west of the Ardennes, as well as to those opposite the British Armies. Yet no one railway system, however elaborate and well organised, could effect the simultaneous withdrawal of the material and personnel of forces so large as those holding the German line from the Argonne to the sea.

If, therefore, the enemy should be forced to evacuate northern France and Flanders, his only hope of withdrawing in good order and avoiding overwhelming disaster would be to fall back more slowly in the central sector covered by the St. Quentin–Cambrai defences than on the flanks, and in particular to extricate his forces south of the Ardennes before the Mézières–Hirson–Maubeuge lateral was interfered with. In other words, as soon as the Allied advance began seriously to threaten Maubeuge, the group of German Armies south of that town would have to commence to retreat. If the Allies reached Maubeuge before this retreat was completed, the German divisions still south of the Ardennes would find the way of escape cut off.

To complete the explanation of the combined offensive a short reference is necessary to the German defence systems. Prior to the Somme battle of 1916 the German line between Soissons and Arras had described a great westwards jutting salient (see sketch facing page 305). The Hindenburg Line had been built as a chord position to this salient, cutting across its base in an approximately straight line from the Laffaux plateau north of Soissons to the old German front line in the Scarpe valley. The effect of the withdrawal to this line, however, had been to create a new great salient between the Argonne and the Oise, with a lesser and very abrupt sub-salient at its apex at Laffaux. The obvious danger of the Laffaux sub-salient had accordingly been met by constructing a southern continuation of the Hinden-

burg Line along the course of the Ailette river and canal to the German defences west of Reims. This was sometimes known as the Alberich Line. The greater Argonne–Oise salient was also provided with a chord position, the Hunding Line running from Vouziers along the Aisne, and thence past Sissonne to the angle formed by the junction of the Serre river and the Oise. An eastern continuation of this line, known as the Kriemhild Line, ran from Vouziers to the Meuse north of Verdun, and thence formed the chord position to the St. Mihiel salient. The abruptness of the new salient formed by the junction of the Hunding Line with the Hindenburg Line in the Oise valley was reduced by a northern continuation of the Hunding Line, locally known as the Beaurevoir–Fonsomme line, which from the Oise near Fresnoy ran northwards to the west of Cambrai, and thereafter linked up with older defences continuing northwards past Douai to Lille.

The Beaurevoir–Fonsomme line, however, was more or less parallel to the Hindenburg Line, and should the enemy be forced back to this position and the Hindenburg Line south of it, his front would still form a marked salient, having the apex of the salient between Laon and St. Quentin. The chord to this salient, and the next defensive stage in a continuous withdrawal, lay along the Meuse Valley to Mézières, and thence still north-westwards to Hirson, Le Cateau and Douai. At this stage, however, the enemy would have the Ardennes immediately at his back over a great portion of his front. His object, therefore, would be to clear the bulk of his forces from the front of the Ardennes before this stage was reached. Should he still be unable to stand, his ultimate line of defence would cover the entrance to the Liège gap from Givet to Maubeuge and Valenciennes. To the north of Valenciennes he would be protected by the Scheldt river.

It will be noted that an advance towards Maubeuge, besides endangering the enemy's lateral communications, also struck at the northern hinge of his successive defence systems. Besides threatening to cut off the German forces

south and south-west of the Ardennes from their natural line of retreat, such an advance would also turn the defensive lines they held. Every mile of progress won eastwards towards Maubeuge would have its inevitable repercussion upon the German line to the south of the line of advance. It may be noted, too, that the attack astride the Argonne struck at the southern hinge of these defensive systems, and thus had effect upon the German position only less important than and directly contributory to the strategic rôle allotted to that offensive, namely, the tying of the enemy to this front until his retreat had been cut. An offensive towards Metz would have had neither the one effect nor the other.

The Allied plan of campaign as finally adopted and carried out was based upon these strategic facts. The Americans and French were to attack side by side in the Argonne and Champagne, and hold the German Armies opposed to them south of the Ardenne Forest; while simultaneously the British Armies were to push forward with the utmost energy and speed towards Maubeuge, seeking to get astride the German main line of communications before the German Armies to the south and east of them could shake off the French and American attacks. It was to be a race against time on either side. Meanwhile it was known that the supreme importance of the main battle between St. Quentin and Cambrai was drawing to it all available German divisions, and that other fronts were being stripped bare. The enemy's difficulties could therefore be increased by an offensive in Flanders which would find little to oppose it and, by driving down the German Armies of the north also upon the Liège gap, would add in proportion to its success to the enemy's embarrassments and to the congestion of his communications.

It would not be enough to endeavour to throw back the German Armies of the centre upon the Ardennes by direct assaults from the south, as Mangin seems to suggest. Had this been the main object of the Allies, the enemy could have drawn off his main forces unhampered to the flanks of the

battle front, and his line of retreat, supposing the attack prospered, would have coincided with the line of his communications. Though they succeeded in driving a wedge between the German Armies east and west of their attack, the French and American Armies would have found the Ardenne Forest country as great an obstacle to their own advance as to the enemy's retreat. They would have been obliged to divert the direction of their offensive towards the north-west and, assuming that the difficulties of an ever lengthening front did not hold up their advance altogether, would have been compelled to follow up the enemy along a line which would have afforded him the best opportunities, so far as communications were concerned, of fighting a successful defensive battle and extricating his armies. There would have been no reasonable chance of cutting off the retreat of any considerable portion of his forces.

The scheme of the general offensive as actually carried out and the rôles of the several Allied Armies were quite different. The whole purpose was to reach the Maubeuge area before the German Armies south of the Ardennes could get away north-westwards. The primary duty of the Franco-American attacks was less to reach the Ardennes than to hold the German forces opposite to them and, by keeping them closely engaged, prevent their timely withdrawal. Later, if our Allies succeeded in this, the Ardenne Forest country would act as the net in which the German shoal, cut off by the advance of the British Armies to the north of it, could be rounded up and collected at leisure.

The credit for this scheme, which was successful, belongs of right to the man who pointed out the error and the short-sightedness of the proposed excursion against Metz.

* * * * * * *

The plan decided on, the Allied Commanders were at one regarding the method by which it was to be carried out. There was to be no delay, no relaxation of effort. Every available man and gun and horse were to be sent into the battle. The enemy was to be given no rest, no time to settle down into the tried defences of the famous Hindenburg

Line, breathe himself and re-establish his moral. There was to be no departure from the principle of sustained effort and reiterated attack that at all times characterised the wearing-out battle. Rather, now that it was clear beyond question that the breaking point had been reached and a decision was at hand, redoubled energy must be demanded of all, and risks must be taken freely which in earlier stages of the struggle it would have been madness to attempt. Risks were taken. The writer vividly remembers standing with another officer before a map of the Forêt de Mormal, with the aid of which a famous Corps Commander explained the manner and methods of the attack which his troops were to carry out upon November 4. The explanation was enough to make any one who had become familiar with the methods and lessons of the fighting of 1916 and 1917, but had not followed the developments of the following year, gasp with astonishment and apprehension. The plan so clearly and graphically described was carried out to the letter and the minute, and the Corps in question realised the greatest advance of any in the final assault of the war.

It was this period of the battle, when the Generalissimo was urging all around him to a supreme effort, and looking not in vain to the British Army to play the leading and decisive rôle in the culminating episode of the great advance, which the British War Cabinet selected to warn the British Commander-in-Chief that an unsuccessful attack upon the powerful entrenched positions behind which the enemy was sheltering would have the gravest effects. No doubt Sir Douglas Haig could interpret this warning as he liked. It made no difference to his actions. As on other occasions, he had no fear of personal responsibility when he had confidence in his own judgment. His reply was to return to England early in the second week in September, when the enemy had just completed his hasty retreat to the Hindenburg positions, to urge upon the home authorities the instant need to send out to France, not siege guns and quantities of heavy ammunition for the reduction of the strongest

field fortifications in the world, but everything that might add to the mobility of his armies.

Before an attack upon the Hindenburg Line proper could be undertaken, there were a series of covering positions which had first to be reduced. Taught, no doubt, by the experience of 1917, the enemy in his last retreat had stopped somewhat short of the line to which he had withdrawn in the spring of that year. Since that date, too, battle tactics had changed in the course of the ceaseless evolution of war, and he must have felt that greater depth was necessary to a sure defence. The middle weeks of September were therefore devoted to capturing these covering positions.

During the night of September 8-9 the French Army on our right surprised the crossings of the Crozat Canal, and pushed forward towards the line of our battle zone of the spring. A local attack by the IIIrd British Corps on September 10 found our old positions at Epéhy held in force, and was unsuccessful. On the 10th and 11th the Germans in turn launched a number of local attacks both on our own front and against the French, unsuccessfully, while our own troops and the French made small advances at other points. The following day the Third British Army carried out successfully a somewhat larger operation in which Trescault, Havrincourt and Mœuvres were taken, with over 1000 prisoners. The ground gained brought us within striking distance of the enemy's main positions on this front, and provoked numerous counter-attacks. To this period belongs the incident of the 'Men of Mœuvres' much written about at the time. Undoubtedly a very gallant action, the criticism of the Corps Commander that the story had been unduly exaggerated and embellished is probably true enough. It is of value as an example of the spirit shown on countless other occasions during the advance by men of all ranks whose fortune it was not to attract a like degree of public attention.

The German withdrawals that had followed Mangin's attacks between the Aisne and the Ailette on September 4 and 5 had carried the enemy's front back to the general line

held by him, from the former river at Fort Condé to Barisis in the spring of 1917 after the Great Retreat. He still held the mass of high ground known as the Laffaux salient, which had formed the western sector of Nivelle's battle front and, eaten into by Mangin's attacks at that date, had been overrun entirely by Maistre's successful limited offensive of October 23, 1917. Mangin was now steadily approaching this same area from the west. Fort Condé had been occupied on September 6 and the village of Laffaux reached. On the 7th further progress had been made against the angle south of Laffaux, and three days later the village itself was passed. On the 14th Mangin attacked on a front of nine miles north of the Aisne, and by pushing forward to a depth of nearly a mile regained this southern sector of the Hindenburg Line, which once before had been in French hands, with 2400 prisoners. Vailly was taken on September 16 and small advances made at other points.[1] The Allies had now possession, therefore, of both ends of the most famous of German defence lines, some nine miles at the southern extremity being held by the French ; while the northern seventeen miles, as well as the seven miles of the Drocourt–Quéant switch behind them, were already in our own hands. Behind both the captured sectors, however, were other defences of equal strength, which linked up well with the central sectors opposite St. Quentin and Cambrai ; so that the supreme importance of the great attack shortly to be launched by the British against the northern half of the central portion of the Hindenburg system was in no way lessened by the earlier Allied successes against its flanks.

The next blow, still preparatory to the combination of

[1] Mangin, *Comment finit la Guerre*, p. 206, says that during the days following September 14 the attack extended and the advance continued towards the Chemin-des-Dames, despite German counter-attacks, only ceasing on the 20th upon orders received to organise the conquered territory. According to the reports received at the time from the French group of armies concerned, this would appear to be a rather optimistic description of what occurred, the advances reported being chiefly too small to be identified on a 1-80,000 map !

major operations shortly to be undertaken against the enemy's main positions, was delivered by the Fourth and Third British Armies on September 18, on a front of about seventeen miles from Holnon to Gouzeaucourt. Debeney's First French Army was expected to prolong the front of assault to the south, but the French co-operation was, in fact, limited to the filling up of a re-entrant in the French line between Fontaine-les-Clercs and the Bois Savy,[1] in the course of which our Allies took 150 prisoners. On the British front of attack our line was advanced on this day to a maximum depth of about three miles, and local engagements during the next few days established us in positions from which our assault could be directed upon the main defences of the Hindenburg Line in this sector. Nearly 12,000 prisoners and 100 guns were taken by us. That such a battle can properly be classed as a preparatory operation is significant of the change that had taken place in the nature of the fighting on the Western Front. The hanging back of the Allied line at the point of juncture of the French and British Armies necessitated another joint attack of a more restricted nature on September 24, in which we took 1000 prisoners and the French 500. The stage was now cleared for the decisive battle.

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The chart facing this page, which should be compared with the sketch map facing page 305, shows the disposition of the opposing forces on September 25, the eve of the triple offensive. The general strategy of the combined operations can be clearly seen. The shaded area again represents the Ardennes and adjoining country of similar natural characteristics, which lie like a rampart between Germany and France. The main trunk line into Germany and the important lateral south of the Ardennes are also shown again in conventional fashion.

On the right, south of Mézières, will be observed the Argonne offensive ready mounted, waiting for the moment

[1] Savy Wood was about 1000 yards south of our right flank at this date.

of assault on the morrow. The reader will note the heavy concentration of French divisions in Gouraud's Fourth French Army, 27 infantry divisions, and the no less powerful grouping of American and French divisions on Gouraud's right, 13 U.S.A. divisions and 4 French. It will be remembered that in rifle strength the 13 U.S.A. divisions were equivalent to at least 30 French divisions. Opposite this formidable mass, which for purposes of comparison can be reckoned at from 60 to 65 divisions, are 19 German divisions and 1 Austrian division, and of the 19 German divisions only 6 were first-class troops.

In Flanders, the northern offensive is also ready to strike on the 28th, though 3 French cavalry divisions are still on their way to the battle area. Thirteen Belgian divisions and the northern corps of Plumer's Second Army, 6 British divisions, compose the group, the whole under the command of the King of the Belgians, with General Degoutte, Commander of the Sixth French Army, as Chief of Staff. Degoutte has 2 French infantry divisions in reserve, as well as the cavalry ; but French troops did not take part in the battle of September 28.[1] Opposite the group of 19 Belgian and British divisions were some 12 German divisions, four of them of good quality.

The reason for the weakness of the enemy on the fronts of these two offensives is instantly disclosed by a glance at the centre of the Allied line, where the battles of August and September had been fought by the Fourth, Third, and First British Armies, seconded by Mangin's Tenth Army, and to a lesser extent by Debeney's First Army and Humbert's Third Army, the latter now withdrawn. The constant pressure of the Allied attacks had drawn to this front more than half the total forces of the German Armies in the west. In and behind the British battle area of September 27 and 29 are seen grouped some 57 German divisions—18 of them assault divisions—with 40 British infantry divisions opposed to them. The proportions between the relative strengths

[1] Certain French writers suggest incorrectly that they did; see in particular Louis Madelin, *Le Chemin de la Victoire*, p. 305.

of attackers and attacked on the fronts of the three offensives afford a striking contrast.

It had been decided that the three great battles should be launched on successive days, commencing on September 26 with the Franco-American holding attack in the Argonne. On the 27th the right of the First Army and the left of the Third Army would begin on the British front the battle which was intended to open the way to Maubeuge and the German communications. Next day the Flanders group would carry out the first stage in the clearing of the Belgian coast. The full development of the central battle was postponed, for tactical reasons which will be explained later, until the 29th. The effect of this order of attack would naturally be a preliminary effort by the enemy to reinforce his armies in the Argonne and Flanders, drawing additional German divisions into the net which the central British offensive, if it could be pushed forward quickly enough, would close.

In the Argonne the American attack was made by 9 divisions in line on a front of 20 miles from the Meuse river at Forges westwards to and including the Forest of Argonne. The six corps of the Fourth French Army continued the battle front on the left of the Americans for another 24 miles to the river Suippes south of Auberive. The combined infantry assault was launched at 5.25 A.M. on the morning of the 26th, after artillery preparation lasting throughout the night. The battle opened well, especially on the American front, and on the morning of the 27th the line reached the previous evening was reported to run from north of Dannevoux on the west bank of the Meuse to Brieulles, and thence south-westwards to Baulny, on the east face of the Argonne Forest. In the Argonne itself the difficulties of the attack were peculiarly great, and from Baulny the American line curved southwards and westwards through the forest to Binarville in touch with the French. From the latter village the line attained by the French curved south and westwards again to Cernay, and thence westwards to Tahure, rising northwards thereafter towards Somme-Py and then

south-westwards to south of Auberive. This represented an advance of from $2\frac{1}{2}$ to $6\frac{3}{4}$ miles on the American front and from $1\frac{1}{4}$ to $2\frac{1}{4}$ on the French front. The same report stated that 12,000 prisoners had been taken.

Later reports from the Americans were not quite so encouraging. On the evening of the 27th came the ominous message that they were 'engaged on their communications,' and a corrected line was given running from north of Dannevoux to Montblainville, that is from 1 to $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles south of that previously reported. There can be little doubt that the Americans were going through the experiences of all new armies in the Great War, though under far less punishing conditions than had prevailed in the first years of the struggle when the German moral was still high. Their troops had gone forward farther and more rapidly than was safe, and would have paid far more heavily for their rashness had the conditions been those of the Somme. At the same time, defects of organisation in regard to communications and supply, that had shown themselves already in the comparatively simple operation at St. Mihiel, where the enemy had already commenced his retreat, developed to a crippling and indeed alarming degree now that an attempt was being made to feed a sustained offensive against an enemy that had orders to resist. It is easy to conjecture what the result might have been had the German infantry displayed the dogged spirit of 1916 and 1917.

None the less, even with their corrected line the Americans had carried practically the whole of the first German defence system, and made good what they had taken; while on this day, the 27th, the French right and centre again pushed forward to a depth of from 1 to 2 miles. Both armies made ground again on the 28th, the Americans being reported to have reached Brieulles once more, but the situation here remained doubtful for some days to come.[1] Prisoners counted had risen to 18,000, of whom the Americans claimed 10,000. On the 29th strong German counter-attacks were reported on the American front, and for the

[1] General Pershing's report does not claim Brieulles till October 10.

next few days only small changes took place in their sector of the battle. The French right and centre continued to make ground, till by the end of the month Gouraud was approaching Montbois, having realised a maximum advance of about seven miles since the commencement of the battle.

Mangin, describing the battle,[1] says that the advance grew much slower on the 28th, when the German reserves began to arrive, and on the 30th stopped altogether for the time being. The battle had been, he says, a very fine local success of a tactical nature, and had used up many German troops, but had not achieved the far-reaching effects expected by Marshal Foch. The Allies had not, indeed, effected a complete breach in the German defence systems. A powerfully organised reserve system was still in front of them. None the less, if our Allies could compel the enemy to maintain the defence of this system and prevent him breaking off the battle, their attacks would have served their purpose. By the 30th, however, other events had occurred on other parts of the German front, the effects of which were to be very far-reaching indeed, and their reaction upon the Argonne battle rapidly became apparent. The Franco-American attacks had broken the German first system of defence over a wide front at a point where any progress of the Allies would accentuate the broad salient in the German line between Verdun and the Oise at La Fère. To an enemy in urgent need of shortening his line and economising divisions to meet the deadly peril of the renewed British attacks on the St. Quentin-Cambrai front, the evacuation of this salient was an obvious step.

As already stated, the object of the Allies was to do their utmost to make it difficult for the German command to disengage its troops. In front of the American Army, indeed, he could not readily do so till he had withdrawn his troops from the rest of the salient ; for the American attack in particular was directed at the southern hinge of the successive systems to which he might be expected ultimately to retreat. The French Armies west of the Argonne had the

[1] *Comment finit la Guerre*, p. 207.

more reason to be watchful, to maintain their pressure incessantly, and to be ready to follow up instantly any rearward movement of the German forces opposed to them.

In the latter task our Allies were not altogether successful. On September 28 the German withdrawal commenced apparently unhindered. On this day Mangin found himself able to recommence his advance eastwards between the Aisne and the Ailette against the Chemin-des-Dames, the enemy retreating before him. Making three miles on this day, on the 29th he reoccupied practically the whole of the ground formerly held by the French south and west of the Oise–Aisne canal. This withdrawal proved the first of a series by which in the course of some fifteen days the whole of the broad salient between the Meuse and the Oise was gradually evacuated.

On the 30th came the report that Berthelot's Fifth Army north-west of Reims was also advancing, and had taken 2000 prisoners.[1] Gaining 2 miles on an 8-mile front on this day, by the evening of October 3 General Berthelot had advanced as much as 8 miles on a front of 18 miles.[2] On the 3rd the retreat started also before the left of Gouraud's Army, its right and centre and the American Army being still held in check. The Americans renewed their attack in force on the 4th, but here the enemy was not yet ready to

[1] These were the only prisoners taken on the front of this withdrawal except for small parties not deemed worthy of enumeration in the French *communiqués*. Much material and many guns had, of course, to be abandoned and fell into French hands.

[2] Mangin states that on the 29th, ' bousculant l'ennemi qui battait en retraite,' his army was threatening the Chemin-des-Dames from the west. ' A sa droite, la 5e Armée Berthelot progresse et occupe le terrain entre la Vesle et l'Aisne ; la 4e armée, à laquelle le général Gouraud a assuré, par des actions locales, une nouvelle base de départ, attaque de nouveau sur tout son front et vient à bout de l'énergique résistance des Allemands.'

This drawing together of the dates of these different events is curious. It suggests, of course, that the French advances were co-ordinated, and that the German withdrawals were the direct result of concerted French action. The clear inference to be drawn from the correct dates, on the other hand, is that the enemy was able to withdraw on his own initiative, and that the French Armies followed up in succession as they discovered what was happening on their respective fronts. See *Comment finit la Guerre*, p. 208.

go back, and the progress made nowhere exceeded a depth of two miles. Between this date and the end of the month the American Army pushed forward by a succession of comparatively small advances. Ground was won by hard fighting, and the Germans delivered numerous counter-attacks. The chief progress was made before the 21st of the month, but by October 30 the Americans had reached and at one point penetrated the final line of the German second defence system west of the Meuse. At this date the Americans had achieved a total advance of from 3 to 7 miles from the line held by them on October 4, or about 11 miles from the line from which the battle had been launched seven weeks previously. The re-entrant at the junction of the two armies in the difficult Argonne country had gradually been filled up.

Meantime Gouraud's Army had made further progress on October 4 on its left, where the German retirement continued, but no advance elsewhere. From this date till the end of the month events on the right half of Gouraud's battle front followed much the same course as events on the American front. From the centre of Gouraud's Army westwards along the front of the Fifth and Tenth French Armies the German retreat proceeded with increasing rapidity till by the middle of the month the Kriemhild and Hunding positions had been taken up successfully.

On the 5th the enemy evacuated the whole of the point of the salient east of Reims to a depth of ten miles, falling back to the line of the Suippes river between Béthenivillle and Pontavert. On the 10th and 11th a new movement began. Following the precedent of his earlier retreat, the enemy commenced to withdraw on the flanks of the now blunted salient, before Mangin and before the left half of Gouraud's Army. On the 12th this stage also was completed. On the east flank from Vouziers to beyond Neuchatel the enemy fell back between 8 and 12 miles to the line of the Aisne. On the west the line of retreat extended from Pontavert to north of St. Gobain to a depth of some 5 miles. Next day the point of the new salient was

evacuated. Laon was reoccupied by the French, and the German front from the Meuse to the Oise now followed a comparatively straight line past Grandpré, Vouziers, Rethel, Sissonne and Pouilly-sur-Serre to the Oise at Travécy. Meanwhile on October 8 two American divisions had attacked the small salient east of the Meuse created by the main American advance, and had captured it in two days' fighting, together with between 3000 and 4000 prisoners. The enemy was back in the Hunding Stellung.

It is now time to complete the explanation of the great retreat by turning to the other battles of the triple offensive launched on September 26-29.

The task with which the British Armies were faced on the St. Quentin–Cambrai front was from every point of view far more difficult than that which the French and Americans had been asked to perform in the Argonne battle sector. The Argonne battle had been launched with an overwhelming superiority of force. The British Armies were called upon to attack an opponent more numerous than themselves. The French and Americans enjoyed the advantage of taking their enemy by surprise, at any rate to a material extent. On the British front the Germans had already been fighting an unbroken battle for a period of seven weeks and expected attacks from day to day. If the German defences on the Argonne front were strong, they were not more powerful either by repute or in fact than the famous Hindenburg Line. In one respect they were much less formidable, for they offered no obstacle to tanks, whereas on the British front the Scheldt Canal and the Canal du Nord made the use of tanks impossible except in certain very restricted areas.

The Hindenburg Line had been sited deliberately and at leisure with a view to securing good artillery positions for the defence, and the line so chosen had been tested by battle experience. There were special tactical difficulties arising from this fact. The lie of the ground was such that on the front of the Fourth Army adequate artillery fire could not be developed to support the assault, or to deal with the cross-fire of German batteries to the north-east on what was

known as La Terrière plateau, till the Third and First British Armies had got forward sufficiently to bring effective fire to bear upon those batteries from the north and north-west. The Third Army had been meeting with very strenuous resistance indeed on the high ground about Gouzeaucourt, where the Hindenburg Line crossed from the Scheldt Canal to the Canal du Nord. The enemy had sent here some of the best troops remaining to him, among them a Jäger division, the rank and file of which fought with all their old skill and determination, beating off our attacks time and again, and jeering at our men as they sought in close and bitter combat to force the Germans from their positions.

The first step was to bring the left of the British battle front forward across the Canal du Nord, so that the La Terrière plateau and the high ground opposite to it west of the Scheldt Canal still held by the enemy might be threatened from the north and dealt with directly by our guns. Yet to cross the Canal du Nord in the teeth of a determined enemy was a task verging on the impossible. North of Inchy as far as the floods of the Sensée the canal was too deep in water for a crossing to be attempted till the enemy had been driven from the eastern bank. The only part where a crossing was at all practicable was in a narrow sector about Mœuvres. Here the canal cutting was dry, but deep and wide as a modern London road when viewed from the house tops.[1] Further, the ground west of the canal in this sector dropped gently down to the canal bank in long open slopes, destitute of cover and liable to be swept at any moment by the enemy's artillery and machine-gun fire.

Upon the storming of this stupendous obstacle depended the issue of the battle on the entire front southwards to St. Quentin. Had the attack upon the canal failed, or even

[1] A portion of this cutting was later used as a road, and a very fine and imposing one it made. People accustomed to the narrow canals of England can form little idea of the nature of the obstacle presented by this vast cutting.

stopped short of complete success, the subsequent assault of the Fourth Army, difficult as it must be in any event, could only have been undertaken in circumstances that might well have decided the Higher Command to abandon it altogether. Certainly the methods actually employed would have had to be modified radically in the direction of a slower and more methodical progression which, by the delay it would have occasioned, would have endangered the success of the whole Allied plan of operations. It followed that the responsibility assumed by the Commander-in-Chief in ordering the First Army to attack was no light one, nor could the sense of it have been lessened either by the message he had lately received from the War Cabinet, or by the knowledge that at this decisive stage in the advance and of the war the bayonet and sabre strength of his armies was once more fallen to 520,000.

It was with an Army less strong numerically than that which had survived the German spring offensive that the onslaught was made upon the most powerful, most important, and the most strongly held of the enemy's defences in the west. At 5.20 A.M. on the morning of September 27 the right of Horne's First Army and the left of Byng's Third Army moved forward to the attack. From start to finish the battle proceeded with almost mathematical precision. The main assault, launched frontally across the bare slopes of the Mœuvres–Inchy defile, gained the east bank of the canal, and then, spreading wide like a fan, overran the whole of the German positions northwards as far as the Sensée and eastwards to the approaches to Cambrai. The dominating position of Bourlon Wood, which in November 1917 had hung like a black thundercloud athwart the front of our attack, was at last wholly in our hands. On this first day, on the greater part of a front of thirteen miles from Beaucamp to Oisy-le-Verger, our troops advanced to a depth of four miles. On the 28th the area overrun was extended southwards to include Gouzeaucourt, northwards to Palluel and westwards to the Scheldt Canal, bridgeheads across

which were secured at two points five miles or more east from our positions of assault. Over 10,000 prisoners and 200 guns were taken by us in the first day's fighting.

It were presumptuous to comment here upon the extreme skill and ability with which this most difficult operation was prepared, controlled and directed by the First Army Commander and his Staff. The fact speaks for itself in terms of sufficient eloquence. It may be worth noting, however, as supplementary evidence of the thoroughness and forethought of the preparations and of the skill and energy of our technical services at this date, that by 9 A.M. on the morning of the attack Canadian Engineers had completed four two-way bridges over the great canal cutting, and by 6.30 P.M. three trestle and pontoon bridges in addition. Needless to say the successful development of the assault depended directly upon the speed and completeness with which such works as these could be carried out.

The left shoulder of the British battle front had now been brought forward level with the right. The area of high ground still held by the enemy in the centre west of the Scheldt Canal had been much restricted, and both this area and the La Terrière plateau on the opposite bank of the canal were in danger from both flanks. While on the Fourth Army front the general line of spurs and valleys trended from north-east to south-west, so that they could readily be searched by the enemy's batteries to the north-east, north of the central sector the general trend of the ground was from south-west to north-east. Good cover was afforded from which our guns could direct their fire south-east against the German batteries that were harassing the Fourth Army from La Terrière plateau. The difficulties of the right of our battle front were relieved to that extent.

Rawlinson's artillery had opened on the 27th, and for two days had subjected the sector of the Hindenburg Line opposite the Fourth Army to intense and incessant bombardment. At 3.50 A.M. on September 29 he attacked, the Third and First Armies prolonging the battle line

to the north, till from St. Quentin to the Sensée a front of over thirty miles was on fire. The main thrust, however, on which the fortunes of the battle hung on this day was made on a front of nine miles between Gricourt and Vendhuille.

Our objectives and plan of operations on this latter front were as follows. On the right the 1st Division of the IXth Corps was to advance along the Thorigny ridge to Le Tronquoy, where for about 1000 yards the Scheldt Canal passes through a second and lesser tunnel. On the left of the 1st Division the 46th Division of the same Corps was to cross the canal at Bellenglise and immediately to the north of the village and turning outwards clear the area lying within the bend of the canal, the ultimate objectives of the division being the villages of Lehaucourt and Magny-la-Fosse. The 32nd Division would then pass through the 46th and carry on the attack to Levergies and to the north of that place.

On the left of the IXth Corps the IInd American Corps assisted by tanks was to storm the tunnel sector of the Scheldt Canal between Bellicourt and Bony, and then, developing their attack south-east, east, and north-east, capture Nauroy, Mt. St. Martin and Gouy. The Australian Corps would then pass through the Americans and continue the advance to Joncourt, Wiancourt, and Beaurevoir. Meanwhile, if all went well, the plan was for the northern portion of this attack to cross the Scheldt Canal at Le Catelet and push northwards against La Terrière in conjunction with a British thrust north-eastwards from Vendhuille against the same objective.

Though the attack succeeded in driving an effective breach through the Hindenburg Line, the operation did not on this day realise the whole of this programme. On the right, indeed, the troops of the IXth Corps, and the 46th Division in particular, carried out the task allotted to them in most brilliant fashion. The attack of the 46th Division, most difficult and intricate as it was, went through without a hitch and over 4000 prisoners and 70 guns were

taken by this division alone. At Le Tronquoy [1] our full objectives were reached and an advance of from 2½ to 3 miles realised on the whole Corps front of attack. From north-east of Magny-la-Fosse, however, where the IXth Corps joined hands with the Corps on their left, the line of our advance at the end of the day ran back due north-west through the western outskirts of Bony.

The explanation of the comparative failure on the left is to be found in a series of circumstances which throw a vivid light upon the seemingly inevitable handicaps which inexperienced troops, however fine their courage and physique, have to contend with in a modern war. On the front of the northern American division the enemy possessed at the conclusion of his retreat three advanced positions of much strength—Quennemont Farm, Gillemont Farm and a rounded hill called The Knoll. These three points would impede the assault on the main German position, and their capture prior to the battle was deemed to be essential. On the 27th, therefore, the 27th American Division had attacked and, as it was reported, secured all these positions. The report was inaccurate. Deceived by the difficulty of accurately locating their positions on a front recently taken over and with few obvious landmarks, the troops attacking on the 27th did not, it is believed, secure control of any of

[1] Louis Madelin has a passage on page 307 of *Le Chemin de la Victoire* which is well worth quoting. He says that the British troops ' carried the heights and reached the outskirts of Le Tronquoy where they *met the victorious soldiers of our Debeney.*' The nearest of Debeney's victorious soldiers were four or five miles off to the south-west, about Francilly-Selency, and there was a whole British division and part of another between them and Le Tronquoy! Sir Douglas Haig's despatch says that on this day ' the First French Army continued the line of attack in the St. Quentin sector.' The French on this day filled in a part of the re-entrant west of St. Quentin and reported the capture of Urvillers, but on the morning of the 30th the Germans were still in the western portions of this village. Madelin goes on to say that, ' worthy of their neighbours,' the French troops ' passed like them the canal and like them attacked the heights.' At Bellenglise the canal turns east and then south behind St. Quentin. The French did not reach it till October 1. The occupation of St. Quentin was not completed till October 2 and on the 4th the canal was crossed. The British broke the Fonsomme line on October 3.

these positions. Gillemont Farm and The Knoll certainly remained in German hands. The result was that on the 29th the American infantry attack on this front was launched from assembly positions as much as 1000 yards behind the line from which the barrage started and was mown down by machine-gun fire from the strong points that should have been captured two days previously.[1] A distinguished American staff officer who visited the battle-ground immediately after the fight brought back word that on this front the American dead lay in long orderly lines, a tribute to the high spirit and splendid courage with which they had advanced to certain death.

Yet even so, the strength, energy and fighting spirit of the American soldiers was not to be denied, and in the first rush bodies of troops made great progress. Contact aeroplanes sent back word that American detachments had been seen at an early hour so far east as Gouy, and high hopes were entertained of a great success all along the line. Then the experience of the Somme 1916 and of other early battles was repeated. Eager for the attack and confident in their powers, the main object of many of the American rank and file would seem to have been to keep in front of the Australians, whose duty was to pass through them to carry on the attack. They went straight ahead, as the troops of the VIIIth British Corps had done before them, and forgot to make sure of the positions they had overrun. After the first flood had passed by, the German garrisons came out of their deep dugouts and from the shafts connecting their trench line with the tunnelled canal. They cut off the retreat of the American troops who had passed beyond them and engaged in a desperate struggle with the Australian divisions who, with no artillery barrage to keep the German machine guns under cover, were forced to use all their battle craft to fight their way forward and make good the breach

[1] It was stated to the writer at the time that the mistake was pointed out to the American units concerned before the battle and that they were urged to alter their artillery arrangements. The reply said to have been made was that it was all right because American infantry were accustomed to march four miles an hour and would soon catch up their barrage.

in the southern half of the tunnel sector. This they succeeded in doing, so that at the end of the day's fighting, despite all misfortunes, the central sector of the Hindenburg Line had been broken through on a front of five miles.

Even north of Bony useful progress was made on the main battle front, though the development of the attack east of the canal was for the time being impossible. Farther north the Third and First Armies closed more tightly upon Cambrai from the south-west and north-west, our troops pushing forward to a maximum depth of $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles and establishing themselves well to the east of the Scheldt Canal from Masnières northwards to the outskirts of Cambrai itself.

The events of these three days on the St. Quentin–Cambrai front put a new complexion upon the military situation in the west. The close fighting that followed from September 30 to October 5, in which the partial failure on the left of the Fourth Army battle front was rectified and the enemy forced to evacuate St. Quentin and the La Terrière plateau, confirmed and emphasised the change.

From the moment the troops of the First Army swept over the Canal du Nord it must have become apparent to the German Higher Command, not only that the British meant to go on, but that it was out of the power of the German Army to stop them. Until that instant the enemy might well have thought, as the British War Cabinet clearly contemplated, that we would be content with the great successes already achieved, and, rather than accept the risk of an unsuccessful assault upon so formidable a position, would sit down before the Hindenburg Line and wait for 1919 and the Americans, or an inconclusive peace. The battle of September 27 declared our intentions and established our power to carry them out. West of the Rhine there were no defence lines comparable with the Hindenburg positions. The speed and certainty with which these had been overthrown made the issue clear beyond reasonable doubt. The utmost the enemy could hope to do was to endeavour to delay our advance and cover his essential railways till he

had been able to extricate his armies south of the Ardennes, and thereafter trust that our growing communication difficulties would give him time to overcome his own.

There was no time to be lost. The distance from Cambrai to the critical railway junction of Aulnoye, just outside Maubeuge, is little more than 25 miles. From Reims to Aulnoye the distance is 65 miles as the crow flies and farther yet by rail. Another 15 miles or so of progress would bring Aulnoye junction within reach of the British guns. For every mile the British advanced eastwards the German forces between the Meuse and the Oise would have to be withdrawn two or three or four miles, if they were not to be cut off.

No time was lost. On September 28 and 29, the days following the storming of the Canal du Nord, the German retreat began, as we have seen, before Mangin. On the 30th, the day following the breaking of the Hindenburg Line at Bellenglise and Bellicourt, the movements spread to the front of Berthelot's Army north-west of Reims. On October 3 the rearward movement received a fresh impulse, when the Fourth Army effected a breach in the Beaurevoir–Fonsomme line, and another and a greater when on October 8 the Fourth and Third Armies drove the enemy from his last remaining field defences back to the line of resistance running through Le Cateau. Both impulses, as has been seen, had their immediate reflection on the French front in the withdrawals that took place on October 5, and on October 10 and 12. The storming of the Canal du Nord on September 27 and the obvious peril in which the whole Hindenburg Line positions were thereby placed gave the signal for the retreat to the Alberich Line. The breaking of the Beaurevoir–Fonsomme line on October 3 gave warning that there was no time to waste, and two days later the withdrawal from the Alberich Line began. The Battle of Cambrai on October 8 brought the British Armies into open country and their cavalry into touch with the Douai–Le Cateau line of resistance. The immediate effect was the rapid evacuation of the whole Laon salient and the com-

pletion of the German withdrawal to the Kriemhild and Hunding Lines.

It is right and proper to point out that on the 28th, as Mangin admits, the Franco-American attacks astride the Argonne had already begun to slow down greatly, and stopped for the time being on the 30th. It was 'a very fine local tactical success.' The explanation of the big strategic movements between Suippes and the Oise commenced by the enemy on September 28 and continued till the middle of October, while progress on the Franco-American battle front was yet slow and hard won, must obviously be sought elsewhere. It can be only found in the fact that between September 27 and October 10 the British and the two American divisions with them broke the main Hindenburg positions and the northern continuation of the Hunding Line behind them and advanced 20 miles in the direction of Maubeuge. In these 14 days we took 48,500 prisoners and 620 guns.

Swift as the enemy had been to realise the consequences of our advance, he was yet not quick enough. Between Suippes and Tergnier he had evacuated an area some 62 miles in width by 20 miles or more in depth, with the loss of much material doubtless, but at a cost of only two or three thousand prisoners.[1] He had succeeded in disengaging on this front, and was now back in the comparative safety of powerful prepared positions. But on the British front the Hunding Line was broken. Our armies were working feverishly at their communications and were already within assault distance of the line of resistance which from Douai and Le Cateau ran to Hirson and Mézières. We were within 15 miles of Aulnoye. Relative to the distances to be covered, our advance had been speedier than the German retreat. The enemy would not be able to remain long on the new line he had taken up south of the Ardennes.

Leaving the British Armies of the right preparing for the new attacks which were to set the whole German front once

[1] On the Argonne battle front prisoners had mounted up. On October 12 Gouraud claimed 21,500 since September 26, and the Americans 17,600.

more in motion, let us turn to the third act of the great triple offensive of September. On the 28th of that month the British and Belgian forces, under the command of the King of the Belgians, struck on a front of some 16 or 17 miles between Voormezeele and Dixmude. The weak German forces opposing them gave way before the assault and British and Belgians vying with each other swept over the desolate ridges east of Ypres, scene of so many desperate fights. By the end of the month both armies had reached and passed the Menin–Roulers road, 10 miles from their positions of assault.[1] On the morning of September 29 the Second Army reported their prisoners for the previous day to be over 3000 and our own casualties about 1300. Our total captures for the battle proved to be 4800 prisoners and 100 guns, and those of the Belgians another 6000 prisoners and some 200 guns. Material progress on the battle front was now checked by bad weather and the extraordinary difficulty of establishing communications across the Ypres battle zone. While organisation for a fresh attack was in progress and the Sixth French Army was interposed in the centre of the Belgian line, new German withdrawals began in the Lys valley and as far south as Lens. On the 7th the area of withdrawal was extended south of Lens and, hastened by our successes on the Cambrai front, by the morning of October 14 the enemy had fallen back to the Douai Canal line, relieving the long northern flank of the First Army battle front.

Good organisation and strenuous exertion enabled the Flanders group to overcome their communication difficulties in a comparatively short space of time, and on the morning of October 14 the offensive was resumed. The right of the attack extended from the Lys at Comines for nine miles northwards and eastwards to the Menin–Roulers road south-east of Moorsleede. This was the British front, the

[1] This advance of ten miles in two days by the British and Belgian forces over ground that was an abomination in the sight of God and man can be compared with the progress of the French and Americans on the Argonne front. The relative strength of attackers and attacked on the two fronts does not account for the difference in result.

main thrust being delivered by the two northern Corps, XIXth and IInd, 41st, 35th, 36th, 29th and 9th Divisions, in the Moorseele sector. On the right of the XIXth Corps the Xth Corps was to push down to the flats on the left bank of the Lys and later endeavour to secure bridgeheads. On the left of the IInd British Corps three Belgian divisions continued the line of attack 4 miles northwards to just south-west of Roulers. Then came 2 French Corps, 4 divisions, on a front of 7 miles passing 1000 yards west of Roulers and north-east of Staden. Next Belgian divisions carried on the battle line another 3 miles to beyond Zarren. Two other Belgian divisions were ready to push forward at Dixmude and from the Nieuport bridgehead when opportunity should offer. There were four French infantry divisions and 3 French cavalry divisions in close reserve on the French front, as well as one Belgian infantry division and one Belgian cavalry division in close reserve behind the northern Belgian battle sector. The British had no reserves, and the troops in line were those that had already fought in the September battle.

The course of the battle as followed on the map from the operation reports was decidedly interesting. South of Roulers the British and Belgian forces went ahead rapidly in close contact and friendly rivalry. The Xth British Corps quickly secured its objectives on the left bank of the Lys, and from Menin northwards to Rumbeke, taken by the Belgians, an advance of $3\frac{1}{2}$ to $4\frac{1}{2}$ miles was achieved at all points on a front of about 8 miles. On the left in the northern sector of the battle the Belgians pushed forward to Cortemarck and to the north of it, an advance of a little more than 3 miles. In the French sector, from Roulers inclusive to south of Cortemarck, the advance by comparison appeared to hang fire, and at the close of the day ranged from rather less than 2 miles to rather more than $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles. Roulers at one time occupied a position resembling that of the star in the Turkish national flag, and was taken by envelopment, as St. Quentin and Montdidier had been. No doubt this was the most prudent way of dealing with a

considerable town ; but if credit is due to the French for the skill and sagacity with which they conducted their share of the battle, no less credit is due to the energy and enterprise of the Belgian and British forces that provided the 'horns' of the enveloping movement.[1] The sketch facing this page shows the somewhat ambitious aims with which the Sixth French Army started this day's battle, and the extent to which they were realised.

The subsequent fighting on this northern front displayed the same general characteristics as those disclosed on October 14. Both wings of the battle made substantial progress on the 15th, the British and Belgians advancing another two miles to Heule and Lendelede station, their objectives for the first stage of the battle, and the Belgian Corps on the left pushing forward the same distance towards Thourout. In the centre there was no change. On the 16th began a wide German withdrawal, the consequence not alone of the local situation, but of the general peril of the German Armies.

The plan of the Flanders operation in the autumn of 1918 was in its main essentials the same as that contemplated in the summer and autumn of 1917. An eastwards attack from Ypres was to gain the ridges overlooking the town,

[1] Louis Madelin has a passage on page 295 of his book *Le Chemin de la Victoire* which, though having direct reference only to Debeney's conduct on August 8 and throughout his advance on the right of the Fourth British Army, is capable of much wider application. He writes : 'Debeney, lui, manœuvrant. Le commandant de la 1re Armée française se revèle, en effet, à cette heure un des premiers manœuvriers de notre armée. Pendant trois mois, ce caractère s'affirmera : Debeney fera tomber les plus fortes positions par des combinaisons.' Debeney was indeed a past master in the art. He was responsible for the coining of a new and expressive, if transient, word in British military language. To 'Deb' meant that the user of the word intended to remain quiescent for a while, till advance on his front had been made easier by the progress of his neighbours. But there were other exponents of the art in the French Army. They had their reason in the natural desire to preserve a powerful French Army to give weight to French counsels in the peace negotiations. They had their justification in the incomparable exertions and sacrifices of the French Army and nation in the early years of the war. The more reason, therefore, that the facts of the 1918 battles should be known, and the credit fairly apportioned.

and the offensive was then to be developed north-eastwards and northwards, with its right flank resting on the Lys. On October 15, 1918, this developing movement was well under way; but the presence of the British Armies at this date within 15 miles of Aulnoye junction added a factor that was absent in 1917. In 1917, even had our advance progressed in accordance with our hopes, the enemy could have formed a new front to the north-west on the line of the Lys. In 1918 this was impossible. A line drawn north from Le Cateau passes within 7 miles of Ghent, and the British at Le Cateau were on the eve of a new attack. The enemy made up his mind to the inevitable, and between October 15 and 23 evacuated the whole area of the Lille salient and the Bruges coastal zone, forming a new front on the line of the Scheldt river and the Oude–Schipdonck canal.

Meanwhile the Fourth, Third and First British Armies had carried forward their communications and recommenced their attacks. In a series of operations begun on October 17 and continued until the 25th, these three armies advanced from 5 to 7½ miles eastwards on a front of 26 miles, capturing 20,000 prisoners and 475 guns. On the 25th their line ran from the Oise–Sambre canal north of Etreux along the western outskirts of the Mormal Forest to south of Valenciennes. The Le Cateau defence line had been left far behind and the railway junction at Aulnoye, now little more than 7 miles distant, had been brought under shell-fire.

The new battle had been begun on the 17th by the Fourth British Army and the First French Army in the Oise–Le Cateau sector. The British and Americans attacking on a front of 11 miles met resistance of a more than usually determined character, but made progress to a maximum depth of 2½ miles and took 4000 prisoners and many guns. The French, attacking on a front of about 3½ miles on our right and also at Mont d'Origny, penetrated to a depth of a little over 2 miles on the main battle front, established a bridgehead across the Oise at Mont d'Origny and took 1200 prisoners. During the next two days the German

resistance weakened and by the 19th the British had reached the Oise–Sambre canal north of Oisy and the French had filled in the angle between the canal and the British right. As the result of this attack, on the 18th the enemy had commenced to evacuate the angle formed by the junction of the Serre river and the Oise and had fallen back to a new line between Pouilly-sur-Serre and Mont d'Origny. This he maintained with little change till the 26th ; though by the 19th Debeney was threatening the shortened salient from the north-west on a 12-mile front from Mont d'Origny to Etreux, and on the same day Mangin attacked the southern flank of the salient on a 7-mile front between Nôtre Dame de Liesse, north-west of Sissonne, and Verneuil-sur-Serre, advancing between one and two miles and taking 1000 prisoners.

On the 20th the Third and First British Armies took up the battle north of Le Cateau, and carried the line of the Selle river as a preliminary to the deeper advance in which the Fourth Army joined them on October 23. Before this latter event, however, the enemy took the first step in his withdrawal from the impossible salient which the British advance had created between Sissonne and Catillon. During the night of October 21-22 patrols of the Tenth French Army advancing east of Pouilly-sur-Serre found no enemy opposed to them, and on the 22nd Mangin was able to advance to a depth of 2 miles on a 12-mile front. The enemy on this front was withdrawing pretty much in his own time, except so far as he was urged to haste by the British threat to his communications. An attempt by the Tenth Army to follow up their advance and cross the Souche river was unsuccessful, and on the 22nd also the First French Army met stiff resistance at Chevresis-les-Dames which our Allies were unable to secure, though at one time they held the village and took 700 prisoners.

On the 25th, however, took place a series of French operations. The Fifth Army attacked the Hunding Stellung on an 8-mile front north of the Aisne, advanced from 2 to 2½ miles and took 2500 prisoners. The Tenth Army renewed

its attack and crossed the Souche on a 5-mile front, taking three hundred prisoners. The First Army, attacking between the Peron river and d'Origny, captured Villers-le-Sec and took 1000 prisoners in an advance of about 1000 yards. Next day the First French Army, at the point of the salient, made more considerable progress, gaining 2 miles on a 10-mile front with 1500 prisoners; but the Tenth Army, attacking at dawn, met a German counter-attack. The Fifth Army was itself counter-attacked and at first forced back. The enemy was holding fast on his flanks, while evacuating the point of the salient, and the attack of the First French Army on the 27th met little resistance. On this day the enemy went back some 3 to 4 miles or more on a 22-mile front between the Serre river and the Oise–Sambre canal north of Guise. This line he held with small change till after the opening of the final British attack.

At the end of October the great conception of the triple convergent offensive was on the point of realisation. In spite of the vast withdrawals he had already carried out, the British advance had beaten the enemy in speed. The all-important lateral railway was under the persistent fire of our guns at the point where it linked up with the main trunk line back to Germany. The net was closing down upon the mass of German troops south and east of the British drive. All that was needed to bring complete disaster upon the German Army was a British advance of 7 or 8 miles, which would put our infantry astride the line we were bombarding. Fifteen miles would bring us to Maubeuge, the western limits of the Ardenne forest country, and the entrance to the Liège bottle-neck. At this moment when, it may fairly be conjectured, only the growing congestion of his road and rail communications prevented a more rapid withdrawal of the German forces south and west of the Ardennes, and while, aided by our own communication difficulties, he was battling desperately to check the British advance and keep the way of escape open a little longer, Foch decided that the time was come to detach French and American troops for the cherished excursion

against Metz. Arguing that the Allied operations in progress towards the end of October would throw the enemy back upon the line of the Meuse, he proposed to turn this line of defence by attacking towards Longwy and Saar. The mass of the German divisions, 150 out of 187, were west of the Meuse, and their lateral communications being cut, would be unable to come to the assistance of the scanty German forces east of the river.

The argument was attractive, but unsound. It offered the quickest road into Germany, and the occupation of the Saar coal-fields, and who knew how long an occupation might last? It drew French and American troops away from the bulk of the forces of a nearly but not yet completely beaten enemy at the moment when the *coup de grâce* was about to be administered. Supposing that final stroke had missed, in the many and incalculable chances of war? Suppose the reduced forces of the British Army—now some 470,000 sabres and bayonets only—wearied by their long advance and far ahead of their railheads—had been checked at the Mormal Forest? There was no real pressure elsewhere, except perhaps far away on the American front east of the Argonne, and American troops were to be taken yet farther east. It was by no means inconceivable that the progress of the Allies might be held up at the last moment and the bulk of the German Army allowed to escape. A French advance into southern Germany, however gratifying to French pride, would have been poor compensation for the loss of a certain opportunity to destroy the German Army in the field.

The full mischief and danger of the proceeding become apparent when the position of the British Army is more clearly considered. Opposite Maubeuge the British Army was carrying out the drive upon the impetus and speed of which turned the whole strategy of the Allied plan of campaign. The drive had been maintained now for nearly three months and, spurred on by thoughts of victory as all ranks were, human endurance has its limits. The same divisions had been flung into the battle time after time and

the strength of the Army had sunk in bayonets and sabres to a figure less than that of the army French had handed over to Haig. Yet at this time we were still fighting on two fronts. Besides the great drive, which might well have absorbed the energies of all of our much reduced divisions, we were maintaining an important part of the Flanders offensive and certainly doing our full share of the work there. Now it is a fact that the troops of the Second Army which were lent to the Flanders group to take part in the battle of September 28 were lent for a specific purpose, and upon the clear understanding that when that purpose had been achieved they would be returned to the British Army and their place taken by French and American troops. Before the end of October that purpose had been accomplished ; but despite urgent and repeated requests to Foch the divisions were not returned. It was the story of the IIIrd Corps in March over again. While American and French troops were being sent away from the critical theatre, where the German Army in the field was fighting its last battle, to start a new war where there was no enemy, the divisions of the northern Corps of the Second Army which, had they been withdrawn from the battle when their task was done, might have set free other British troops to feed the great drive against Maubeuge, were kept in action in Flanders and on October 31 thrown for a third time against the enemy in a set battle.[1]

Foch took the risk, and on October 27 withdrew Mangin from the Laon front in order that he might take charge of the new offensive against the Metz gap. Fortunately the British Army did not miss its stroke. Before the projected operation in the east could be got ready Haig had dealt his final blow, and there was no need for any other. That Foch should have contemplated the Metz operation, however, and for its sake have risked calling off a part of his

[1] It is worth noting that the six British divisions which took the main part in the Flanders offensive on the British side had suffered in the period between March 21 and July 15, 1918, an average of 6250 casualties per division.

pack before the kill, would seem to show that even at this date he had not fully mastered the strategy of the plan Haig had in mind when he first persuaded his French colleague to abandon his proposal for disjointed and eccentric attacks in favour of convergent and co-ordinated offensives. Had Foch fully understood Haig's plan he must surely have realised that, given continued pressure on all fronts and but a short further advance in the vital sector opposite Maubeuge, the end had already come. In that event he must have done all in his power to give weight to the British thrust by relieving the British group in Flanders, and to support the British effort by engaging the main German forces with all available French and American divisions.

Be that as it may, the last month of the war opened with simultaneous attacks on the three main battle fronts. The Flanders group had begun on October 31, and by November 1 the enemy retired across the Scheldt with the loss of 1100 prisoners to the British and more than 1000 to the French and Americans. On the same day, November 1, the First American Army and the Fourth French Army re-opened their joint offensive in the Argonne battle sector, the Americans on a front of 15 miles west of the Meuse to Grandpré inclusive and the French attacking eastwards on both sides of Vouziers. The Americans completed the capture of the German second defence system on their front, and in the centre of their battle sector advanced to a depth of almost $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles. By November 3 they had taken over 4000 prisoners and more than 100 guns. The Fourth French Army advanced to a maximum depth of about a mile on a 4-mile front south of Vouziers and to a maximum depth of about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles on an 8-mile front east of Attigny. They reported 1500 prisoners on this day. Following upon this attack the enemy began to fall back towards the Meuse, and by the evening of November 4 the line in this sector ran approximately due east and west between Stenay on the Meuse and Attigny on the Aisne.

In the centre of the Allied battle front the attacking British Armies had been actively preparing for the final

stroke. On November 1 the First Army and the northern division of the Third Army attacked on a front of about 8 miles from Valenciennes southwards and gained from 1 to 2½ miles of ground and 2300 prisoners. The success was followed up, and by November 3 the advance had gained a depth of from 5 to 6 miles, Valenciennes had been taken and the number of prisoners increased to 5500.

The enemy was now withdrawing on the First Army front, and our chief fear was lest the area of withdrawal should be continued to the south before the Third and Fourth Armies could strike. The demoralisation of the enemy was increasing progressively, but he was still fighting with every weapon open to him,[1] and the need of the moment was not so much to hasten his retreat—for it was evident that his chief anxiety was to withdraw and that only the congested state of his communications was preventing a more speedy movement—as to hit him quickly and sufficiently hard to complete his disorganisation before he could draw clear, and at the same time to get our own armies definitely established across his line of escape.

In the early morning of November 4 the Fourth, Third and First Armies attacked on a front of 30 miles from the Sambre to north of Valenciennes, the First French Army continuing the battle line for a further 9 miles southward on our right, to the neighbourhood of Guise. On the whole of this front the Allies went forward, the French to a depth of ½ to 2 miles and the British to a depth of from 2 to over 5 miles. Before dawn on November 5, British troops had reached the eastern edge of the Mormal Forest, from 6 to 7 miles from their assembly positions. Despite the fact that on the First Army front the German withdrawal had already begun, on the first day over 10,000 prisoners were passed back by the British units engaged, and over 150 guns

[1] The following somewhat curious wireless message was received on November 3: 'Au Quartier Général Français. Le commandant en Chef Allemand porte reconnaissance du Quartier Général Français qu'un grand nombre d'habitants civils français se trouve encore derrière les lignes allemandes. Commandant en Chef Allemand.'

reported captured. The total captures by the British reached 19,000 prisoners and 450 guns, the increased proportion of guns to prisoners telling its own tale of German demoralisation. In addition the First French Army took 5000 prisoners and many guns.

The German Army had broken, and the Allied advance went forward at a rate dictated more by the deficiencies of their own communications than by any resistance that the German machine gunners and special services could offer. Our three cavalry divisions had a task that was really beyond them, though they strove to the limits of the powers of horse and man to do the work that four times their numbers might have done effectively. It was the fate of the cavalry on the Western Front to be cut down, during times when cavalry work was impossible, to numbers which made it equally impossible for them to do their legitimate work effectively when their opportunity came.

Even so, the three cavalry divisions we still possessed were of great utility, and with their aid we had pushed forward from 25 to 30 miles on the battle front when on November 11 the Armistice put an end to hostilities. Aulnoye junction was passed on November 6, and Maubeuge taken on the 9th. The only door by which the German Army could have escaped as an organised force had been closed.

Elsewhere events meanwhile had been moving rapidly. At the shock of the assault of November 4 the whole German front crumbled. The collapse was general, not only in the battle area but along the entire line from the Meuse to the Dutch frontier. All thought of a progressive withdrawal had gone. It had become a case of each unit for itself, and a desperate endeavour to save as much as possible from the wreck. On November 5, the day following our attack, the enemy retreated to a depth of from 4 to 7 miles on a front of over 90 miles from Rethel to beyond Valenciennes. On November 6 the movement was continued on a front of 120 miles from the Meuse westwards, to a maximum depth of some 9 or 10 miles at the deepest part of the salient.

So day by day the retreat continued, till on November 11 it had progressed to a depth of nearly 40 miles on a front of 180 miles from east of the Meuse to Ghent.

The retreat had come too late. Even before November 11 the roads and railways back to Germany had become so choked with troops and transport that the German delegates sent to negotiate the terms of armistice with the Allied Commanders found it impossible to make headway against the stream of traffic. When on November 9 the German wireless announced the abdication of the Kaiser and the Crown Prince's renunciation of his claims to the German throne, the German Army, jammed in the Liège bottle-neck, was like a whale aground in shallow water, trapped by its very bulk and able neither to escape nor to defend itself.

On the British front the war ended on November 11 with a message from the enemy which may be classed as characteristic, namely, that a British heavy gun was in action after 11 A.M. south-west of Binche. 'Please stop firing.'

CHAPTER IV

THE ARMISTICE

THERE has been a good deal of misunderstanding about the Armistice of November 11, 1918. The Armistice was welcomed by the vast majority of combatants in the British Army at the front in France—there is no question about that. One reason why it was approved and welcomed by rank and file and officers alike was intelligible to any one personally acquainted with conditions on the Western Front; acquainted, that is, with what modern warfare actually is; acquainted with the military life of a civilian army in the field, and with casualties and death there. In all ages, among virile nations, there has been—and always will be—a sprinkling of out-and-out fighting men, men who choose war for its own sake. They like the life in the field in spite of its hardships, discipline, constant tremendous risks. It appeals to them apart even from hope of promotion and desire of glory. To represent that this type is confined to bloodthirsty and brutal men is superficial. As a fact the born fighting man is far from necessarily bloodthirsty and brutal. More often he displays sympathy and generosity; which can be lacking in the man who loathes the idea of war but finds his *métier* in the struggle for existence, for security, power, fame or money, that prevails in peace as we know it to-day. Call them knights-errant, dreamers, or adventurers, filled with that 'inborn warlike passion'—which Kinglake even attributed to whole races—the vast drama of war, its fatalism, its uncertainty appeal strongly to men of this

type. Julian Grenfell put something of this passion into noble verse—

> 'The thundering line of battle stands:
> And in the air Death moans and sings,
> But Day shall clasp him with strong hands,
> And Night shall fold him in soft wings.'

Possibly there was a percentage of men of this type who did not share in the general satisfaction over the Armistice, and felt out of their element. But the average fighting man in a national civilian army sees things in another light. Men who stoically, heroically, had been through some or many of the battles of 1916, 1917 and 1918, offensive and defensive, rejoiced in the Armistice. They rejoiced in it unreservedly. They had played their parts in bringing the enemy to submission at last. They now wanted home, and the ameliorations which—so they naturally presumed—would fall to them by right and national pledge. This attitude of the combatants in the British Army in France and Belgium in November 1918 was perfectly sound and sane.

This view at the front was not, however, universal at the base. There were people safe at home who knew nothing of the war at first hand, and were for going on with the operations, for carrying the war across the Rhine and crushing out of the enemy in his own country any spirit of opposition that still lingered. They thought the Armistice was weak. They attributed it—in this instance wrongly—purely to the intervention of the civil power. They feared the statesmen had stepped in and robbed the soldiers of an out-and-out victory.

Again, there were others who thought that the Allied Armies ought to have gone forward, crossed the Rhine into Germany and dictated terms, in the first instance, there. They believed this would have led to a more satisfactory and enduring peace: that it would have impressed more thoroughly on the Germans that they were vanquished in war; and, additionally, might have saved Europe from the

chaos and fits of revolution into which various nations fell soon after the fighting ended. There may have been something in this point of view. But it was not practicable, and those who at the time thoroughly realised the position would have been the last to favour it.

The Armistice on November 11, 1918, was necessary. It would have been foolish on the part of the leaders, French, British and American, to oppose it, and it would have been entirely impracticable.

What was the point of view of the British leadership when the Armistice was proposed ? We must clear this up, for there have been some rather gross misstatements over the matter in France. M. Recouly's book has been referred to in previous chapters. It is not one that can be overlooked, for it contains a good deal of first-hand information derived from important sources. M. Recouly has conveyed to perhaps a considerable French public through his popular work an erroneous view of the attitude of British leadership in the Allied discussions which preceded the Armistice. He writes as if the British Commander-in-Chief, at, for instance, the conference between military leaders at Senlis, was for letting off the enemy lightly : and he goes on to picture the French leader as insisting we must force on the enemy the severest terms, and the American leader joining in for, as it were, France *v.* Great Britain.

M. Recouly writes as if Foch was far more than the Doullens and Beauvais arrangements stipulated, far more than Generalissimo on the Western Front. He would convey the idea that Foch was in supreme command of the whole world-war, navies as well as armies included. Despot and superman. M. Recouly ought to be aware of the fact that Foch had no power to decide on the terms of the Armistice in the way he reports him as doing. If, at the time of the Armistice negotiations, M. Recouly had come into touch with the civil power in this country—to say nothing of his own—he would have learnt that we meant to have, and did have, a voice in this matter. The question of Austria and other fronts was also involved by a proposition to cease

hostilities ; and in these matters the military leaders on the Western Front, whether French, British or American, were, neither individually nor collectively, in a position to lay down the law in the manner in which M. Recouly wrongly reports Foch as doing at Senlis. M. Mermeix, an interesting French writer on the war, alludes much more reasonably to this matter. Some passages of his, bearing on the Armistice, in *Les Négociations Secrètes et les Quatre Armistices avec Pièces Justificatives*, are quoted in J. M. Keyne's book, *A Revision of the Treaty.* (Macmillan, 1922.)

As a fact the Allied leaders in the field were well agreed there should be an armistice, and the military terms affecting the Western Front were resolved on and approved by British, French and American.

Our aim—one which must serve France equally with ourselves—was that the Germans should evacuate France and Belgium, give up Alsace-Lorraine, and surrender the war material necessary for disarmament. That certainly would be all which either the British military or the British civil power need insist on at this stage. We were not bent on further and useless bloodshed, or on a senseless campaign of revenge immediately after the collapse of the German Army. Only a Chauvinist or Jingo, who was not himself suffering and fighting, would complain of us on that score.

What was the Allies' position when an armistice was asked for by the Germans, and arranged ? First, it must be well understood that the German Army was thoroughly routed and disorganised by November 11, 1918 ; the notion that we left off fighting at the very time when we ought to have finished completely with the German military resistance and organisation prevailed because this fact was not grasped. Had we gone on fighting, and ultimately marched to Berlin or to the other side of Berlin, the German Army would only have been in the condition it actually was on November 11, 1918—beaten and finished as a striking force. It had no more chance of recovery through the Armistice than it would have had if we decided not to treat at all with Germany at that date, but to continue hostilities. The

only result would have been an addition to casualties, and casualties—as far as the Allies were concerned—chiefly at the expense of the British Army. Our casualties between August 8 and November 11 were far higher, considering the comparative sizes of the two armies, than those of the French; the French Army, throughout that period, as before it, being roughly some 60 per cent. larger than the British. Our casualties were far higher because, to secure a decision in 1918—perhaps to secure a decision at all; for who can now feel sure what would have happened had the struggle been prolonged into 1919?—Haig recognised that the British Army was bound to play the great part in attack among the three Allies, France, Great Britain and America, and decided despite the British War Cabinet's hesitation to go through with his operations in August and September 1918. We had to pay a heavy price before we could force the enemy out of the Hindenburg Line opposite our front; and our battles later, when the war became one of movement, were, as has been shown in the preceding chapters, bigger than those of our Allies. We were obliged to be the great attacking army in the final advance.

Not only had we to pay a very high price before we could force the enemy out of the Hindenburg Line where they had in September massed, as has been shown, the best of their troops—a price which no skill and foresight could have avoided. But we were in November suffering perhaps not high but certainly unfair casualties farther north where our Second Army had been put at the disposal of the French and Belgians for the purpose of dislodging the Germans from the coast. This accomplished, it was to revert to the British Higher Command. Unfortunately, as Colonel Boraston has shown, it was not at once returned: Foch preferred to use it in order to economise French effort and cost. The British Government was appealed to by our Higher Command —and the British Government did nothing!

These facts are mentioned here in order to show any one still unconverted to the wisdom of the Armistice on November 11, 1918, that our military leadership and the

civil power would have acted wrongly if they had pressed for a continuation of the hostilities at that date.

Suppose Great Britain had wished, and the French and Americans had agreed, to refuse a reasonable armistice, and instead continued the hostilities, the Allied casualty list, it is true, would probably not have been large from November 11 onwards ; but there would have been casualties. There were still German machine gunners ready to hold out during the retreat of the vanquished and disorganised army ; and that must mean loss of life for the attackers—life sacrificed without gain after the rout of the enemy.

'The strategic plan of the Allies,' as the Despatch tells us, 'had been realised with a completeness rarely seen in war.' And again, 'widespread damage would have been caused to the country through which we passed, and further casualties must have been incurred. On the other hand, the Armistice in effect amounted to complete surrender by the enemy, and all that could have been gained by fighting came into our hands more speedily and at less cost' (footnote to *Sir Douglas Haig's Despatches*, p. 298).

Besides, after each great advance which we made, it was imperative to stop for a while in order to ensure our communications and bring up the supplies for a great army. The difficulties of bringing up these supplies are touched on in 'The Final Despatch.' Constant and accumulating during the war of movement, they had by no means disappeared by November 11. 'At the time of the Armistice railheads were on the general line Le Cateau, Valenciennes, Lille, Courtrai, and for many miles in front of them bridges had been broken and track torn up and destroyed by mines. Even after the cessation of hostilities delay-action mines, which the enemy had laid in the course of his retreat without preserving exact record of their location, went up from time to time, causing serious interruption to traffic. . . . The work of reconstruction, therefore, was most arduous, continuing day and night.'

We must not assume that, Armistice or no Armistice, the Allies could in either event have marched straight

forward into Germany. The truth is that the progress of the reduced forces sent forward to hold the Rhine and the Rhine bridgeheads was neither easy nor speedy, although carried out under conditions approximating to those of peace. The battle of the 4th November was fought by divisions many miles farther in advance of railhead than the extreme distance at which, before that battle, it was thought that a major operation could be undertaken and successfully maintained. The supply services performed wonders and were helped, as it happened, by a spell of hard, dry weather that enabled the roads to stand up to the ceaseless passing and repassing of heavy motor vehicles. Each new advance, however, that carried our fighting line yet farther from the devastated belt—the result of past years of stationary warfare—which our engineers, railwaymen and labour corps were straining every nerve to bridge, raised new problems of supply and fresh doubts and anxieties as to how much farther we could go without a halt.

No doubt ways would have been found—short as we were of cavalry—to maintain pressure upon the enemy, but no amount of pressure could have increased the capacity of the roads and railways behind the German front. These were already choked. Had the Allied advance continued, great numbers of Germans must have been overtaken and made prisoners. The task of feeding them, as well as the civilian population of the liberated districts, would have fallen upon the Allied supply services, which were already strained to the limit of their resources. The roads behind our advancing line would have been impeded by long columns of prisoners, in addition to the steady stream of evacuated civilians returning to their homes. After the Armistice the Allied line halted where it stood for a week in order to allow the enemy to bring the chaos of his retreat into something like order, and to enable the Allies to improve their own communications. When the advance was resumed only comparatively small forces were sent forward, and these without heavy guns

and with limited quantities of artillery and small arm ammunition. Even so, and though we took a full month to complete the occupation of the left bank of the Rhine and the bridgeheads, our troops outmarched their supplies and had to halt afresh at the German frontier to enable the supply services to catch up with them. Had it been necessary to fight our way forward, on the one hand the confusion of the enemy's communications would have grown worse, if possible, instead of better, and on the other hand our own roads and railways would have had to deal also with the evacuation of the wounded and the maintenance of ammunition supply for a fighting army. We were entering on winter, when the roads across the Ardennes might at any time be blocked with snow. Bad weather would have meant the collapse of the eighty miles or more of road between our railhead and the fighting line. Had hostilities continued it would have been matter for no great surprise had neither of the combatant armies crossed the Rhine till the spring.

To refuse the Armistice in such conditions, or to make it of such a punitive character that even the vanquished German Army might have stiffened in some degree and resolved to fight on for a time, would have meant carrying the campaign well on into 1919. For various reasons, into which we need not now go, that was a course which good judges on the British side wished to avoid.

By bringing hostilities to an end in 1918 we saved ourselves not only life and money, but we could secure our position in another and most important matter. The close of the struggle in November left us with a very powerful army: in other words, with right to a very powerful voice and will in the forthcoming peace negotiations and treaty. It would be insincere to represent that Great Britain set no store on this. She attached great importance to it. The French from 1916 onwards had been concerned over this. They felt that they must have a powerful army at the close of the war, otherwise their influence in the peace negotiations and ultimate treaty would suffer.

We have seen that they were most uneasy on this score over their heavy losses between 1914 and the end of the summer of 1916. Great Britain would view the matter in much the same light. Her responsible leaders would through humane considerations be concerned by heavy casualties, as the bill, which had to be paid if we were to deliver the 'knock-out blow,' mounted up. But they would be concerned, too, as the French were, by this national consideration; for, if our voice in the settlement was to be powerful, we must too have a most powerful army at the close of the fighting.

Suppose the war went on, and the submission of Germany was deferred to some time in 1919, what might reasonably be expected to happen? By that time the third great Allied nation, America, would have assumed the dominating position. She, too, would have had an army of millions. The growth of the American effort in the summer of 1918 could leave neither France nor Great Britain in doubt as to that. French man-power was declining. Great Britain had still substantial resources to draw from. She might in 1919 be in a better position than France; still her own man-power problem was becoming a serious one.

On the other hand, America had immense resources to draw on for fighting purposes. She was coming on rapidly. She showed not the least intention of economising her expenditure in money and the material of war. She was swiftly and resolutely building up an organisation at the base in France which in 1919 would be mighty. Those who doubt this should study General Pershing's final report. As to her intention of intervention in the European settlement at the close of hostilities, there was in 1918—and till far into 1919—not the least doubt in the Entente as to that.

Into the welter that followed when the Allied Armies had carried through their task, and the Allied statesmen had taken up *theirs*, we propose to say but little. It is not within the province of this book. But it is necessary to differentiate between the Armistice period in 1918 and the Peace Treaty Conference period in 1919. Responsibility

for the former rested largely with the military leaders—naturally in regard to its recommendation — whereas responsibility for the latter rested wholly with the civil power. It is all wrong to conclude, because the Peace Conference and the Treaty of Versailles had unfortunate results, or were not well conducted, that therefore the Armistice should not have been recommended by the military leaders, and arranged on November 11 after the great offensive had been completed and the German Army reduced to submission.

The peace negotiations and the resettlement of Europe were the work mainly of four Great Powers, two of which by some sardonic freak of fate sent as their supreme representatives two statesmen who were not conversant with the race problems of the Continent they sat down to reform, and were largely ignorant of the history of its nations —and apparently even of its school map. At any rate one of them confessed he did not know where Teschen was, which he might well have capped by enquiring who was Maria Theresa. Whilst it turned out that the other, who was to have a great voice in the settlement and to insist on principles or philosophies compared with which those of the despots of the old dynastic wars were mild or acceptable, had not the support of the nation he was supposed to represent at Versailles : on the contrary, it was discovered that he misrepresented that nation.

The result : Europe fell into a state of chaos greater than existed during the war. But that disaster, with the bitter quarrels which from 1919 onwards broke out between the three chief European Allies, and the long deferment and ultimate failure of the reparation and indemnity schemes, cannot be attributed directly or indirectly to the military side, to its approval of the Armistice. All these problems and disputes were solely within the realm of statesmanship. There were periods of incapacity during the war, and it would be futile to pretend that the military sides were always exempt from blame. There was the Nivelle period, for the failure of which the temporary Generalissimo may have

been as responsible as the French Ministry that discovered or the British Ministry which courted him. Therein French and British civil and the French military sides were jointly responsible. But there was no period of incapacity in which the military side was involved as remote from unity as that which resulted from the Versailles Conference and Treaty : and that Conference and Treaty were exclusively the affair of the civil power. The distinction is obvious, but it is right to repeat and insist on it ; for there has been an inclination to link the period of the Armistice with that of the Conference and Treaty in 1919 and to condemn the whole. The military Armistice with its sound and reasoned terms was the fitting result of the complete defeat and overthrow of the German Army, which was effected by the brilliant operations of the British in union with French and Americans. It put the trump cards into the hands of Allied statesmanship, which then sat down to win, or lose, the game.

No doubt the Conference and Treaty were a very difficult business. Conceive the greatest statesmen in history assembled at Versailles the task would still have been immense, friction would still have occurred in Europe. It would be foolish to represent that, had a single great statesman dominated at Versailles in 1919, or a trinity or quartette of great statesmen, all things would have gone through peaceably and satisfactorily. Equally, it would be foolish to represent that everything in the treaty was wrong and ought to be 'scrapped.' There was 'something attempted, something done' at Versailles towards a settlement ; and the statesmen there need not be accused of lack of good intention.

We should not forget that the peace treaties, as a whole, were bound to be far harder of solution than the rearrangement of Europe which followed the French wars of the last century. Somewhat as the struggle on the Western Front was vastly more involved and difficult than any previous war in history, so was Versailles in 1919 more involved and difficult than Vienna in 1815. Conceive Mr. Wilson and

his semi-directives absent from Versailles, there would still have been a group of new nations resolved on self-determination and complete independence—nations to which we had pledged ourselves in this matter by innumerable public and official utterances throughout the war. In fact, as the war differed from the old wars in being one in which the masses, or democracy, flung themselves in the cause of liberty, so did Versailles differ from the old treaty-making.

But, admitting this, the hard fact remains that the Treaty of Versailles is now recognised to have been defective in many directions ; and that more could and ought to have been done towards European reconstruction. Thus the dilatory policy in regard to reparations, followed by the announcement of vast claims which turned out to be wholly impracticable, reflects discredit on the statesmen of Great Britain, America, France and Italy who deferred these financial problems.

History will draw a sharp distinction between the military skill which in 1918 forced the war to a speedy close, and the purely civilian period which followed and flung the greater part of Europe into paroxysm.

THE END

APPENDIX I

The following passages are quoted from Part II. of The Final Despatch of Sir Douglas Haig, General Headquarters, British Armies in France, March 21, 1919 (*London Gazette*, April 8, 1919, Supplement dated April 10, 1919).

A Single Great Battle

In this, my final Despatch, I think it desirable to comment briefly upon certain general features which concern the whole series of operations carried out under my command. I am urged thereto by the conviction that neither the course of the war itself nor the military lessons to be drawn therefrom can properly be comprehended, unless the long succession of battles commenced on the Somme in 1916 and ended in November of last year on the Sambre are viewed as forming part of one great and continuous engagement.

To direct attention to any single phase of that stupendous and incessant struggle and seek in it the explanation of our success, to the exclusion or neglect of other phases possibly less striking in their immediate or obvious consequences, is in my opinion to risk the formation of unsound doctrines regarding the character and requirements of modern war.

If the operations of the past four and half years are regarded as a single continuous campaign, there can be recognised in them the same general features and the same necessary stages which between forces of approximately equal strength have marked all the conclusive battles of history. There is in the first instance the preliminary stage of the campaign in which the opposing forces seek to deploy and manœuvre for position, endeavouring while doing so to gain some early advantage which might be pushed home to quick decision. This phase came to an end in the present war with the creation of continuous trench lines from the Swiss frontier to the sea.

Battle having been joined, there follows the period of real struggle in which the main forces of the two belligerent armies are pitted against each other in close and costly combat. Each commander seeks to wear down the power of resistance of his opponent and to pin him to his position, while preserving or accumulating in his own hands a powerful reserve force with which he can manœuvre, and, when signs of the enemy becoming morally and physically weakened are observed, deliver the decisive attack. The greatest possible pressure against the enemy's whole front must be maintained, especially when the crisis of the battle approaches. Then every man, horse and gun is required to co-operate, so as to complete the enemy's overthrow and exploit success.

In the stage of the wearing-out struggle losses will necessarily be heavy on both sides, for in it the price of victory is paid. If the opposing forces are approximately equal in numbers, in courage, in moral and in equipment, there is no way of avoiding payment of the price or of eliminating this phase of the struggle.

In former battles this stage of the conflict has rarely lasted more than a few days, and has often been completed in a few hours. When armies of millions are engaged, with the resources of great Empires behind them, it will inevitably be long. It will include violent crises of fighting which, when viewed separately and apart from the general perspective, will appear individually as great indecisive battles. To this stage belong the great engagements of 1916 and 1917 which wore down the strength of the German Armies.

Finally, whether from the superior fighting ability and leadership of one of the belligerents, as the result of greater resources or tenacity, or by reason of higher moral, or from a combination of all these causes, the time will come when the other side will begin to weaken and the climax of the battle is reached. Then the commander of the weaker side must choose whether he will break off the engagement, if he can, while there is yet time, or stake on a supreme effort what reserves remain to him. The launching and destruction of Napoleon's last reserves at Waterloo was a matter of minutes. In this World War the great sortie of the beleaguered German Armies, commenced on March 21, 1918, lasted for four months, yet it represents a corresponding stage in a single colossal battle.

The breaking down of such a supreme effort will be the signal

for the commander of the successful side to develop his greatest strength, and seek to turn to immediate account the loss in material and moral which their failure must inevitably produce among his opponent's troops. In a battle joined and decided in the course of a few days or hours, there is no risk that the lay observer will seek to distinguish the culminating operations by which victory is seized and exploited from the preceding stages by which it has been made possible and determined. If the whole operations of the present war are regarded in correct perspective, the victories of the summer and autumn of 1918 will be seen to be as directly dependent upon the two years of stubborn fighting that preceded them.

The Length of the War

If the causes which determined the length of the recent contest are examined in the light of the accepted principles of war, it will be seen that the duration of the struggle was governed by and bore a direct relation to certain definite factors which are enumerated below.

In the first place, we were unprepared for war, or at any rate for a war of such magnitude. We were deficient in both trained men and military material, and, what was more important, had no machinery ready by which either men or material could be produced in anything approaching the requisite quantities. The consequences were twofold. Firstly, the necessary machinery had to be improvised hurriedly, and improvisation is never economical and seldom satisfactory. In this case the high-water mark of our fighting strength in infantry was only reached after two and a half years of conflict, by which time heavy casualties had already been incurred. In consequence, the full man-power of the Empire was never developed in the field at any period of the war.

As regards material, it was not until midsummer 1916 that the artillery situation became even approximately adequate to the conduct of major operations. Throughout the Somme battle the expenditure of artillery ammunition had to be watched with the greatest care. During the battles of 1917, ammunition was plentiful, but the gun situation was a source of constant anxiety. Only in 1918 was it possible to conduct artillery

operations independently of any limiting considerations other than that of transport.

The second consequence of our unpreparedness was that our armies were unable to intervene, either at the outset of the war or until nearly two years had elapsed, in sufficient strength adequately to assist our Allies. The enemy was able to gain a notable initial advantage by establishing himself in Belgium and Northern France, and throughout the early stages of the war was free to concentrate an undue proportion of his effectives against France and Russia. The excessive burden thrown upon the gallant Army of France during this period caused them losses the effect of which has been felt all through the war and directly influenced its length. Just as at no time were we as an Empire able to put our own full strength into the field, so at no time were the Allies as a whole able completely to develop and obtain the full effect from their greatly superior man-power. What might have been the effect of British intervention on a larger scale in the earlier stages of the war is shown by what was actually achieved by our original Expeditionary Force.

It is interesting to note that in previous campaigns the side which has been fully prepared for war has almost invariably gained a rapid and complete success over its less well prepared opponent. In 1866 and 1870, Austria and then France were overwhelmed at the outset by means of superior preparation. The initial advantages derived therefrom were followed up by such vigorous and ruthless action, regardless of loss, that there was no time to recover from the first stunning blows. The German plan of campaign in the present war was undoubtedly based on similar principles. The margin by which the German onrush in 1914 was stemmed was so narrow, and the subsequent struggle so severe, that the word 'miraculous' is hardly too strong a term to describe the recovery and ultimate victory of the Allies.

A further cause adversely influencing the duration of the war on the Western Front during its later stages, and one following indirectly from that just stated, was the situation in other theatres. The military strength of Russia broke down in 1917 at a critical period when, had she been able to carry out her military engagements, the war might have been shortened by a year. At a later date, the military situation in Italy in the autumn of 1917 necessitated the transfer of five British divisions

from France to Italy at a time when their presence in France might have had far-reaching effects.

Thirdly, the Allies were handicapped in their task and the war thereby lengthened by the inherent difficulties always associated with the combined action of armies of separate nationalities, differing in speech and temperament, and, not least important, in military organisation, equipment and supply.

Finally, as indicated in the opening paragraph of this part of my Despatch, the huge numbers of men engaged on either side, whereby a continuous battle front was rapidly established from Switzerland to the sea, outflanking was made impossible and manœuvre very difficult, necessitated the delivery of frontal attacks. This factor, combined with the strength of the defensive under modern conditions, rendered a protracted wearing-out battle unavoidable before the enemy's power of resistance could be overcome. So long as the opposing forces are at the outset approximately equal in numbers and moral and there are no flanks to turn, a long struggle for supremacy is inevitable.

The Extent of our Casualties

Obviously, the greater the length of a war the higher is likely to be the number of casualties incurred in it on either side. The same causes, therefore, which served to protract the recent struggle are largely responsible for the extent of our casualties. There can be no question that to our general unpreparedness must be attributed the loss of many thousands of brave men whose sacrifice we deeply deplore, while we regard their splendid gallantry and self-devotion with unstinted admiration and gratitude.

Given, however, the military situation existing in August 1914, our total losses in the war have been no larger than were to be expected. Neither do they compare unfavourably with those of any other of the belligerent nations, so far as figures are available from which comparison can be made. The total British casualties in all theatres of war—killed, wounded, missing and prisoners, including native troops—are approximately three millions (3,076,388). Of this total, some two and a half millions (2,568,834) were incurred on the Western Front. The total French losses—killed, missing and prisoners, but exclusive of wounded—have been given as approximately 1,831,000. If an

estimate for wounded is added, the total can scarcely be less than 4,800,000, and of this total it is fair to assume that over four millions were incurred on the Western Front. The published figures for Italy—killed and wounded only, exclusive of prisoners—amount to 1,400,000, of which practically the whole were incurred in the western theatre of war.

Figures have also been published for Germany and Austria. The total German casualties—killed, wounded, missing and prisoners—are given at approximately six and a half millions (6,485,000), of which the vastly greater proportion must have been incurred on the Western Front, where the bulk of the German forces were concentrated and the hardest fighting took place. In view of the fact, however, that the number of German prisoners is definitely known to be considerably understated, these figures must be accepted with reserve. The losses of Austria-Hungary in killed, missing and prisoners are given as approximately two and three-quarter millions (2,772,000). An estimate of wounded would give us a total of over four and a half millions.

The extent of our casualties, like the duration of the war, was dependent on certain definite factors which can be stated shortly.

In the first place, the military situation compelled us, particularly during the first portion of the war, to make great efforts before we had developed our full strength in the field or properly equipped and trained our armies. These efforts were wasteful of men, but in the circumstances they could not be avoided. The only alternative was to do nothing and see our French Allies overwhelmed by the enemy's superior numbers.

During the second half of the war, and that part embracing the critical and costly period of the wearing-out battle, the losses previously suffered by our Allies laid upon the British Armies in France an increasing share in the burden of attack. From the opening of the Somme battle in 1916 to the termination of hostilities the British Armies were subjected to a strain of the utmost severity which never ceased, and consequently had little or no opportunity for the rest and training they so greatly needed.

In addition to these particular considerations, certain general factors peculiar to modern war made for the inflation of losses. The great strength of modern field defences and the power and precision of modern weapons, the multiplication of machine guns, trench mortars, and artillery of all natures, the employment of gas and the rapid development of the aeroplane as a formidable

agent of destruction against both men and material, all combined to increase the price to be paid for victory.

If only for these reasons, no comparisons can usefully be made between the relative losses incurred in this war and any previous war. There is, however, the further consideration that the issues involved in this stupendous struggle were far greater than those concerned in any other war in recent history. Our existence as an Empire and civilisation itself, as it is understood by the free Western nations, were at stake. Men fought as they have never fought before in masses.

Despite our own particular handicaps and the foregoing general considerations, it is satisfactory to note that, as the result of the courage and determination of our troops, and the high level of leadership generally maintained, our losses even in attack over the whole period of the battle compare favourably with those inflicted on our opponents. The approximate total of our battle casualties in all arms, and including Overseas troops, from the commencement of the Somme battle in 1916 to the conclusion of the Armistice is 2,140,000. The calculation of German losses is obviously a matter of great difficulty. It is estimated, however, that the number of casualties inflicted on the enemy by British troops during the above period exceeds two and a half millions. It is of interest, moreover, in the light of the paragraph next following, that more than half the total casualties incurred by us in the fighting of 1918 were occasioned during the five months March-July, when our armies were on the defensive.

Why we attacked whenever possible

Closely connected with the question of casualties is that of the relative values of attack and defence. It is a view often expressed that the attack is more expensive than defence. This is only a half statement of the truth. Unquestionably, unsuccessful attack is generally more expensive than defence, particularly if the attack is pressed home with courage and resolution. On the other hand, attack so pressed home, if skilfully conducted, is rarely unsuccessful, whereas, in its later stages especially, unsuccessful defence is far more costly than attack.

Moreover, the object of all war is victory, and a purely

defensive attitude can never bring about a successful decision, either in a battle or in a campaign. The idea that a war can be won by standing on the defensive and waiting for the enemy to attack is a dangerous fallacy, which owes its inception to the desire to evade the price of victory. It is an axiom that decisive success in battle can be gained only by a vigorous offensive. The principle here stated had long been recognised as being fundamental, and is based on the universal teaching of military history in all ages. The course of the present war has proved it to be correct.

To pass for a moment from the general to the particular, and consider in the light of the present war the facts upon which this axiom is based.

A defensive rôle sooner or later brings about a distinct lowering of the moral of the troops, who imagine that the enemy must be the better man, or at least more numerous, better equipped with and better served by artillery and other mechancial aids to victory. Once the mass of the defending infantry become possessed of such ideas, the battle is as good as lost. An army fighting on enemy soil, especially if its standard of discipline is high, may maintain a successful defence for a protracted period, in the hope that victory may be gained elsewhere or that the enemy may tire or weaken in his resolution and accept a compromise. The resistance of the German Armies was undoubtedly prolonged in this fashion, but in the end the persistence of our troops had its natural effect.

Further, a defensive policy involves the loss of the initiative, with all the consequent disadvantages to the defender. The enemy is able to choose at his own convenience the time and place of his attacks. Not being influenced himself by the threat of attack from his opponent, he can afford to take risks, and by greatly weakening his front in some places can concentrate an overwhelming force elsewhere with which to attack. The defender, on the other hand, becomes almost entirely ignorant of the dispositions and plans of his opponent, who is thus in a position to effect a surprise. This was clearly exemplified during the fighting of 1918. As long as the enemy was attacking, he obtained fairly full information regarding our dispositions. Captured documents show that, as soon as he was thrown once more on the defensive and the initiative returned to the Allies, he was kept in comparative ignorance of our plans and

dispositions. The consequence was that the Allies were able to effect many surprises, both strategic and tactical.

As a further effect of the loss of the initiative and ignorance of his opponent's intentions, the defender finds it difficult to avoid a certain dispersal of his forces. Though for a variety of reasons, including the fact that we had lately been on the offensive, we were by no means entirely ignorant of the enemy's intentions in the spring of 1918, the unavoidable uncertainty resulting from a temporary loss of the initiative did have the effect of preventing a complete concentration of our reserves behind the point of the enemy's attack.

An additional reason, peculiar to the circumstances of the present war, which in itself compelled me to refuse to adopt a purely defensive attitude so long as any other was open to me, is found in the geographical position of our armies. For reasons stated by me in my Despatch of July 20, 1918, we could not afford to give much ground on any part of our front. The experience of the war has shown that if the defence is to be maintained successfully, even for a limited time, it must be flexible.

The End of the War

If the views set out by me in the preceding paragraphs are accepted, it will be recognised that the war did not follow any unprecedented course, and that its end was neither sudden nor should it have been unexpected. The rapid collapse of Germany's military powers in the latter half of 1918 was the logical outcome of the fighting of the previous two years. It would not have taken place but for that period of ceaseless attrition which used up the reserves of the German Armies, while the constant and growing pressure of the blockade sapped with more deadly insistence from year to year at the strength and resolution of the German people. It is in the great battles of 1916 and 1917 that we have to seek for the secret of our victory in 1918.

Doubtless, the end might have come sooner had we been able to develop the military resources of our Empire more rapidly and with a higher degree of concentration, or had not the defection of Russia in 1917 given our enemies a new lease of life.

So far as the military situation is concerned, in spite of the great accession of strength which Germany received as the

result of the defection of Russia, the battles of 1916 and 1917 had so far weakened her armies that the effort they made in 1918 was insufficient to secure victory. Moreover, the effect of the battles of 1916 and 1917 was not confined to loss of German man-power. The moral effects of those battles were enormous, both in the German Army and in Germany. By their means our soldiers established over the German soldier a moral superiority which they held in an ever-increasing degree until the end of the war, even in the difficult days of March and April 1918.

APPENDIX II

Munitions; and Mr. Lloyd George's Share therein

The problem of munitions and its ultimate solution is not one we need go into at any length. But it must be touched on. There was a long and acid dispute about it during and after the war: though the main facts are to-day well known to, and accepted by, reasonable people.

We started the war unprovided with the material for anything but a short struggle such as the French, ourselves and other nations looked for: and indeed, though the equipment of our Expeditionary Force was a marked improvement on the equipment of previous armies which we had put in the field, we started the war insufficiently provided with the material, or the means for speedily supplying that material, needed for a short war on the scale of the 1914 operations.

From August 1914 to May 1915, it was the duty of the War Office to arrange for the supply of munitions. The department concerned was that of Major-General Sir Stanley Von Donop, Master-General of the Ordnance. During the controversies over the munitions question, the statement was often made that the War Office and its chiefs, including Lord Kitchener, completely failed to realise the urgent need for an adequate supply of munitions of all kinds, and that no steps worth mentioning were taken to secure the shells, guns, rifles, etc., with which to equip our Army. That statement was wrong. The War Office put out large orders for munitions during the months in 1914 and 1915 for which they were responsible. But, owing to (*a*) the absence of provision for the speedy manufacture of munitions

on a large scale, (*b*) the relations between Capital and Labour, (*c*) the dearth of material and skill and knowledge, and (*d*) the voluntary system which drew away munitioners to the Army, the orders issued by the War Office materialised slowly.

It should be borne in mind that the production of rifles, guns or shells on a great scale takes the best part of a year, unless the factory and its machines, the material and the skilled and unskilled labour are all ready for the task. This experience was common, virtually, to the whole period of the war. The saying 'a rifle takes a year to make' is not as absurd as it seems: it is nearer the truth than many charges made against the War Office in 1915 onwards.

Being thus hopelessly handicapped from the start, the War Office could not speedily produce the munitions needed.

Nor could the Ministry of Munitions, on succeeding the War Office in this matter, in May 1915, speedily produce them. In fact the vast bulk of the munitions used by the British Army in France throughout 1915, and well on into 1916, was simply that which had been ordered by the War Office in 1914-1915. The Battle of Loos, as an example, was fought with munitions ordered by the War Office and supplied through its successor.

The pretence that the Ministry of Munitions waved its wand and, lo! the munitions, is foolish.

None the less, the creation of the Ministry of Munitions was a wise step by the Government, and Mr. Lloyd George, its prompter, was at this period most useful. However bad were the blunders which, as Prime Minister, he committed in 1917 and 1918 by his interventions in military operations he, unquestionably, did good service in 1915. It is true he did not perfect the organisation of the Ministry of Munitions. On the contrary, that Ministry was far from thoroughly organised when he left it in 1916. The labour difficulty, for example, was unsolved then. But the series of vigorous speeches which he delivered in the spring of 1915 at great manufacturing centres aroused the nation to the peril of the situation. It was the kind of crusade we needed—one which the War Office in 1914-1915 had to do without. It was not speedily followed by a sufficient supply of munitions. Far indeed from it. We had to wait till 1917 for enough shells for our guns. But it rushed into existence a ministry which, as time went on, was to prove most valuable. Legislation was speedily introduced and passed which began to

put the requisite pressure on more than one class. The 'business as usual' cry was stilled. Immense numbers of amateurs, men and women, were drawn into the manufacturing of munitions, and their work became invaluable. Rightly, the Ministry of Munitions set aside altogether the question of expense, which had always hampered the War Office in its attempts to equip us against war.

Mr. Lloyd George continued, it is true, to oppose the passing of a fair law of obligatory service, which would have helped the munition cause, and he did not succeed in his attempts to control labour, as the South Wales coal strike showed. Still the new Ministry rapidly developed, and the chief credit for that should be given to him.

APPENDIX III

BRITISH CASUALTIES IN FRANCE BETWEEN MARCH 3 AND NOVEMBER 11, 1918. ALL ARMIES.

Week ended—		Week ended—	
March 3	2,500	July 7	6,000
,, 10	4,000	,, 14	3,000
,, 17	9,500	,, 21	6,000
,, 24	24,000	,, 28	13,500
,, 31	47,000	August 4	2,500
April 7	77,500	,, 11	24,000
,, 14	48,000	,, 18	21,000
,, 21	57,000	,, 25	26,000
,, 28	41,500	September 1	44,500
May 5	21,500	,, 8	27,000
,, 12	11,000	,, 15	14,000
,, 19	10,000	,, 22	19,000
,, 26	11,500	,, 29	25,500
June 2	8,000	October 6	41,000
,, 9	11,500	,, 13	34,500
,, 16	5,500	,, 20	21,500
,, 23	4,500	,, 27	26,000
,, 30	4,500	November 3	18,000
		,, 11	3,100

Total between the beginning of the British offensive, August 8 (Battle of Amiens), to its close, Nov. 11 . 345,100

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